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## The Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary [T1775] by Sengzhao et alii and the Chinese Conquest of Buddhism

Baggio, Giacomo

DOI:  
[10.33612/diss.94589377](https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.94589377)

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*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Baggio, G. (2019). *The Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary [T1775] by Sengzhao et alii and the Chinese Conquest of Buddhism*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen. <https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.94589377>

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# **The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Commentary [T1775] by Sengzhao *et* *alii* and the Chinese Conquest of Buddhism**

**PhD thesis**

to obtain the degree of PhD at the  
University of Groningen  
on the authority of the  
Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga  
and in accordance with  
the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on

Monday 30 September 2019 at 14.30 hours

by

**Giacomo Baggio**

born on 18 August 1979  
in Palmanova, Italy

**Supervisors**

Prof. C.K.M. von Stuckrad

Dr. S. Travagnin

Prof. S. Zacchetti

**Assessment Committee**

Prof. M. Radich

Prof. O.J. Moore

Prof. J.A. Benn

ISBN: 978-94-034-1910-7 (electronic version)

## Acknowledgments

*Ilha do Norte, onde não sei se pro sorte ou castigo dei de parar  
Por algum tempo, que afinal passou depressa como tudo tem que passar  
Hoje eu me sinto como se ter ido fosse necessário para voltar  
Tanto mais vivo, de vida mais vivida dividida pra lá e pra cá*  
(Gilberto Gil, *Back in Bahia*)

I wouldn't have been able to get to end of this research work without the support of many people and the warmth of so many friends. I wish to mention and thank them here.

Lia, Davide and the “Sicilian connection”, plus all the people met at *Sole in Cantina*, the sunniest basement in town where music and stories mingle together in a quasi-mystical atmosphere.

Marjan and Marinella, great “pioneers” from my homeland: independent and brave, hospitable and generous; in many ways ahead of our times.

Valerio and Sara, whose warmth and positive energy lifted me up in many difficult moments. They reminded me that there is always sunshine above the grey clouds.

Nicoletta: while joking and laughing with her over coffee I felt like a joyful Zorba dancing on a beach, untouched by worldly failures and successes.

Elisa, Thomas and kids (now in Sidney, Australia): so far away, yet always so close by. They are like family.

Max from Genova, companion of countless discussions and sorties into the impalpable realms of philosophy.

My cherished Taiwanese friends: the inimitable Lu 陆 and her lovely wise parents; “Big brother” Yang 楊大哥 whose wonderful Taiji lessons helped me regain strength and balance; the always cheerful and resourceful “Master” Wei 魏老師, a true brother to me.

Prof. Tu Yanqiu 涂艷秋 of the National Chengchi University, with whom I had many interesting chats. She was so kind to give me advice and to provide me with useful materials.

All the friends at the Faculty: Andy, Joas, Marje, Luisa, Dave, Iis, Jing and many others.

My Day-to-day Supervisor Stefania, who read the various draft versions of this thesis and proposed numerous improvements. The Official Supervisor Kocku, who provided many useful comments.

All the staff members at the Faculty, *in primis* the truly indispensable Willeke, and van Putten who was often able to put back in line my unruly PC.

The Directors of the Graduate School: Jacques and Marjo.

Last but not least, I wish to thank my parents, brothers and sisters.

*Once we knew the world well.  
It was so small it could fit in a handshake,  
so easy you could describe it with a smile,  
it was simple as old truths in a prayer.*

*History did not welcome us with fanfares.  
It threw filthy dust into our eyes.  
Before us only dead-end roads,  
poisoned wells, bitter bread.*

*Our war's booty is knowledge of the world.  
It is so large it can fit in a handshake,  
so difficult you can describe it with a smile,  
it is strange as old truths in a prayer.*

(Wisława Szymborska, *Once We Knew*, 1945)

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## Disambiguation on some terms used in this work

- *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*. If not otherwise specified (e.g. Kuiji's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*, Sengrui's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* etc.) this term indicates the collective commentary including annotations by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什, Sengzhao 僧肇, Daosheng 道生 and Daorong 道融 known in Chinese as *Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經 and included in Taishō Tripiṭaka vol. 38, n. 1775. It is this text that constitutes the main focus of the present research.

- *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* indicates the various editions (those transmitted - partially or entirely - and those of which we only know few details from ancient writings) of the collective work including the annotations of the above mentioned commentators.

It is useful to remind that the term *Guanzhong* 關中 (lit. [Region] Within the Passes) indicates the ancient metropolitan region of Chang'an. Hence "*Guanzhong exegesis*" indicates the textual interpretations of the scriptures elaborated in Chang'an by Kumārajīva and his Chinese assistants (which in turn are sometimes called *Guanzhong exegetes*, *Guanzhong commentators* or *Guanzhong scholar-monks*).

- *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 (*Guanzhong Expository Commentary on the Collectively Annotated Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*) [T2777] is a commentary on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* composed in 760 by the monk Daoye 道液. The author based his own exegesis upon a rich collection of annotations on the text by Kumārajīva, Sengzhao, Daosheng, Daorong and Sengrui 僧叡, plus a few by some Tiantai masters; among these, Sengzhao's explanations are admittedly regarded as the most important reference. The term *Guanzhong* in the title of this work is due to the fact Daoye also resided and operated in the Tang capital Chang'an, and it was there that his commentary was written.

- *Guanzhong shu* 關中疏 is an abbreviation of the title of the above work. It is used differently in just one case, viz. when the Sui exegete monk Zhiyi 智顗 uses it in his own writings to indicate the version of the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* by Kumārajīva and his assistants which he was able to consult in his times.

## Important notices

- When translating from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* I have frequently adopted McRae's English translation of the sūtra text (McRae 2004). As the author clearly stated in his preface, he intended "to 'represent' the Kumārajīva version of the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, to create an English version that provides access to the text as it might have been understood by fifth-century Chinese readers" - *Ibidem*, p. 62 -, and this is the reason why this version fitted in particularly well with the exegesis provided by Kumārajīva himself and his disciples. When reproducing MacRae's translation I have scrupulously signalled it by the script MR followed by the number of the page of McRae 2004 where the translated passage is found (e.g. MR, p. 89). The absence of such script implies that the translation is mine. The translation of materials from the *Commentary* itself is instead *always* mine.

- In the translated excerpts from the *Commentary* usually the sūtra text is in bold type; the commentary follows in normal type.

K = Kumārajīva

SZ = Sengzhao

DS = Daosheng

SR = Sengrui

# INTRODUCTION

## 1. The aim of this thesis

This thesis will provide an in-depth analysis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* (*Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經 [T1775]) traditionally ascribed to Sengzhao 僧肇 (384 - 414); it will investigate its exegetical approaches, discuss its doctrinal and cultural interpretations, and its editing process and transmission against the wider background of the Chinese appropriation of Buddhism. On the one hand this research will shed more light on a number of more general issues related to the development of Chinese Buddhist exegesis; on the other hand, it will serve to better outline some of the strategies of cultural adaptation of Buddhism that were employed in China particularly in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century.

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* is a collection of explanatory annotations on the Chinese version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* produced in the year 406 by the great translator<sup>1</sup> from Kucha Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (344 - 413). The annotations, which follow the text in the form of an inter-linear commentary (viz. they are “inserted” (*zhu* 注) after the term, sentence or passage of the original text which is explained), are provided by three main authors, which are counted among the major Buddhist figures of the early 5<sup>th</sup> century. The first is Kumārajīva himself, a missionary and translator who marked a shift in the history of Chinese Buddhist translation and exegesis due to the accuracy of his renderings and the quality of his explanations; the second is Sengzhao, a monk who worked side by side with the foreign master since his arrival in Chang’an in 401 and whose acclaimed treatises (collected into the *Zhao lun* 肇論 [T1858]) laid the foundations of the Chinese Mādhyamika; the third is Daosheng 道生 (ca 355 - 434), a monk trained in Southern China who resided in Chang’an from 404 to 408 and would later become famous for his speculations revolving around the conception of Buddha Nature (*Foxing* 佛性). To these three authors a fourth one must be added, i.e. Daorong 道融 (355 - 434), another of Kumārajīva’s assistants who is credited with having composed a complete commentary on this scripture (*Weimo yishu* 維摩義疏)<sup>2</sup>; however, since only one entry has been preserved in the collective commentary<sup>3</sup> it would be impossible to undertake any in-depth discussion of his work<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> As it will be constantly reminded in this work, within the context of Chinese Buddhist translation the term “translator” is to be handled with particular care. It will be useful to anticipate here that **1.** in the ancient Chinese Buddhist sources the term “translator” (*yiren* 譯人) mainly indicates the “issuer” of a certain text, usually a foreign monk who was conversant with a certain scripture and was able to “recite” it in the original language (either by heart or by relying on a manuscript he had carried from abroad) and explain its meaning; in most cases this so-called “translator” had a very approximate knowledge of the Chinese language or none at all, and had to rely on a bilingual interpreter (*chuanyu* 傳語) for delivering his explanations; Kumārajīva was in this regard a partial exception, being able to formulate by himself a first oral “translation draft” of the recited scriptures; **2.** the Buddhist translation activity was organized in China as a team work involving a number of operators with specific expertises and tasks (interpreters, exegetes, scribes etc.); being so, the so-called “translator” was but one of the players, certainly an important one but by no means the main one; **3.** the translation activity was articulated into a series of successive steps (recitation of the text, explanation, discussion on the meaning of words and expressions, questions from the audience etc.) and the translation produced in such way was in all respects a “collective work”; being so, it is not at all surprising that - as it clearly emerges from the sources - the “translator” was very far from having control over the actual translation output, to the point that after the final Chinese version was decided, he could even disagree with some of the renderings adopted.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 6, p. 363, c27-29

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經 [T1775], vol. 5, p. 371, c28-p. 372, a12)

<sup>4</sup> It bears mention that also other monks belonging to Kumārajīva’s entourage wrote commentaries on this scripture, namely Huiyuan’s disciple Tanshen 曇詵 (361 - 440) (cf. *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 6, p. 363, a21-28) - a work that has been lost - and Sengrui 僧叡 (ca. 352 - 436) who is known for having written an expository commentary on the scripture (the *Pimoluojieti jing yishu* 毘摩羅詰經義疏). Of this last work only the preface survives in *Chu sanzang jiji* 出三藏記集 [T2145] (cf. vol. 8, p. 58, c11-p. 59, a18), along with some 20 entries preserved in Daoye’s

The thesis subtitle contains a pun on the title of Zürcher's fundamental history of Chinese Buddhism (*The Buddhist Conquest of China*<sup>5</sup>), and intends to put a special emphasis on the proactive role played by the Chinese exegetes in re-interpreting the Buddhist doctrine; in fact, far from being passive recipients, they applied their intelligence, zeal and creativity to appropriate the foreign message and make it their own, an aspect that has been treated also by Zürcher himself<sup>6</sup> but still deserves - in my opinion - a more thorough examination.

The topic of this thesis has even more ties with Zürcher's work. In fact, as it is known, when choosing the topic for his PhD dissertation the Dutch scholar originally planned to study the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and its early Chinese reception with a special focus on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* by Kumārajīva and his disciples; such work has never seen the light, and only his *magnum opus* (*The Buddhist Conquest*) - which was intended as a preliminary study for approaching the topic - was published. This has been related by Zacchetti in a public speech on Zürcher's work and academic trajectory:

According to Paul Demiéville's well-informed review of the book [*The Buddhist Conquest of China*] (not surprisingly, one of the best we have, given that Deméville was one of the greatest masters of Chinese studies, as well as Zürcher's teacher), Zürcher's original plan was to focus his dissertation on the celebrated Mahāyāna sūtra known as *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and its early Chinese reception. However, he soon realised that he could not properly study this topic without having at first carried out a preliminary study of the introduction and early adaptation of Buddhism into China: and this is how he ended up writing the *Buddhist Conquest*<sup>7</sup>.

We have every reason to suppose that, in Zürcher's original project, a key role was to be played by the early 5<sup>th</sup> century commentary on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* produced in the circle of the great translator Kumārajīva, which is one of the main sources we possess on the thought of that period. In fact, I have a vague recollection that, in one of our last meetings in the spring of 1995, Prof. Zürcher mentioned to me his previous work on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa commentary*, and that conversation left me with the impression that he had done quite a lot of work on this text. Be that as it may, no published work on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* ever materialized, so that the *Buddhist Conquest* came to play the role of a sumptuous introduction not to a study of 5<sup>th</sup> century scholasticism, but to the whole of Erik Zürcher's subsequent research on Chinese Buddhism.<sup>8</sup>

---

道液 (mid-Tang dynasty) *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏卷上 [T2777] and *Jingming jing Guanzhong shichao* 淨名經關中釋抄 [T 2778].

<sup>5</sup> This work was first published in Leiden in 1959

<sup>6</sup> As Teiser well remarks, the title of Zürcher's study is in this respect somehow misleading in that it does not reflect the approach actually adopted by the scholar throughout the book (cf. "The book shows that, contrary to the "Conquest" the title flirts with, the interaction between Indian and Chinese ideas took place in terms that were already Sinicized. Foreign-born missionaries and translators of texts did not (at this time) transplant a distinct species of Indian Buddhist thought in Chinese soil. Rather, according to Zürcher, they selected texts for translation that they thought their Chinese audience wanted to read. Chinese literati did not stand outside of their linguistic world in order to study the correspondence or lack of correspondence between Sanskritic and Chinese ideas. Instead, native categories provided the terms in which the Chinese intelligentsia talked about Buddhism" (Teiser 2007, pp. XIV - XV)). It is true, however, that the focus of Zürcher's work is on the Chinese social environment and historical context; a great attention is also devoted to the treatment of many aspects of the Chinese indigenous cultural background, but - needless to say - in a work of such scope and magnitude it would have hardly been possible to comprehensively analyze the strategies of cultural adaptation as they are reflected in single works. In this sense, my research claims to contribute with a specific case-study to the more general picture already traced by Zürcher.

<sup>7</sup> It bears mention that in Zürcher's *Conquest* T1775 is mentioned sporadically and only in the notes (*viz.* p. 364 n. 258, p. 383 n. 157 and p. 392 n. 89); however, this must be largely due to his choice to conclude his historical survey with the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, thus leaving Kumārajīva's era almost outside of the picture).

<sup>8</sup> Zacchetti 2014

Many years have elapsed since Zürcher expressed the intention to work on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*, and the fact that so far no comprehensive study has been dedicated to it made it worth (if not even necessary) to undertake the task.

## 2. Reasons for choosing this text

The reasons for choosing the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* as the topic of the present dissertation are indeed numerous, and they are both personal and objective. I shall start by briefly relating the former.

My MA thesis defended at the Ca'Foscari University of Venice in 2004 focused on the early Sinitic interpretations of Buddhist emptiness (the - improperly - called “Six Schools or Seven Sects” *liujia qizong* 六家七宗) formulated during the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup> and their relation to the Chinese Xuanxue 玄學<sup>10</sup> ontological theories so popular at the time. Since one of the main sources we possess on those interpretations is the polemical treatise *Buzhen kong lun* 不真空論 (*Emptiness of the Non-absolute*) by Sengzhao, I had analyzed and translated that text, while also investigating the life and work of the author. During that research, I had realized how the exegesis of translated scriptures played a primary role in the constitution of Chinese autochthonous theories; in fact, at least two of the Sinitic interpretative theories are thought to have originated from a particular reading of a certain sūtra<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, I could observe how Sengzhao, while confuting those early interpretations, brought forward a new understanding of Buddhist emptiness which - albeit being explicitly praised by Kumārajīva himself - still represented a very personal synthesis between Indian and Chinese thoughts whose articulation was clearly far away from the Indian Mādhyamika *śāstras*.

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* was a voluminous work providing a vast array of materials on which basis I could better understand the creative power of exegesis and the Chinese re-invention(s) of Indian Buddhism during the early 5<sup>th</sup> century; also, the study of this text would give me the chance to move further on a “territory” (that of the Chinese intellectual and cultural milieu of the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries) which I was already acquainted with, and widen my inquiry by including the works of other exegetes and by looking at them from new perspectives. These are the reasons why, when Professor Zacchetti suggested that I focus my research on this commentary, I found it both reasonable and stimulating.

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<sup>9</sup> These were interpretative theories aiming at providing a philosophical explanation of Buddhist Emptiness as it was exposed in the Prajñāpāramitā Literature (those early exegetes had to make sense of those newly translated texts without the aid of the Indian Mādhyamika *śāstras* that were introduced to China by Kumārajīva only at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>10</sup> The Xuanxue 玄學 (often translated as “Dark Learning”, “Mysterious Learning” or - rather improperly - “Neo-taoism”) represented the dominant mode of philosophical discourse in China between the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries and can be described primarily as a new way of understanding and explaining the Classics based on the assumption that the words and expressions of the ancient texts were but “traces”, imperfect albeit necessary characterizations of an underlying unfathomable Mystery (*xuan* 玄) representing the true message the Sages of Old wanted to transmit. In the attempt to further clarify the relation between Mystery and words, substratum and phenomena, the one and the many etc. the Xuanxue philosophers developed a rich and articulated philosophical vocabulary that was to be widely employed by the early Buddhist exegetes and translators with varying degrees of awareness and with different results (countless research works on Xuanxue have been published in various languages along the years. For a concise presentation see the “Neo-Daoism” entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* available online and Zürcher 2007, pp. 86 - 95; for those interested in a more in-depth study of the topic the starting point is the collection of essays and annotations in Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 4).

<sup>11</sup> I am referring here to the theories “Emptiness of the mind” (*xin wu* 心無) maintained by Zhi Mindu 支愍度 and the “Identity with Matter” or “Matter as such” (*jise* 即色) established by Zhi Daolin 支道林. The first, according to Chen Yinque was based on a particular reading of passages from the *Fanguang bore jing* 放光般若經, the *Daoxing bore jing* 道行般若經 and the *Chixin fantian suo wen jing* 持心梵天所問經 (see Chen Yinque 2001 (a)), whereas the latter was first “extracted” from a passage of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (Zhi Qian’s version) and then further elaborated (see Zürcher 2007, p. 123 and *Ibidem* p. 362, note 215).

Apart from my personal interest for this text and the themes involved in its study, there are many objective reasons that make the text itself important and worth being thoroughly investigated.

First, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* is a capital document on the evolution of Buddhist (and also non-Buddhist) thought during this age. In his important article «Vimalakīrti en Chine» (which was included into Lamotte's French translation of the sūtra) Prof. Demieville made an acute concise assessment of this work in which he pointed out:

De cette première moisson d'exégèse chinoise, nourrie des enseignements oraux de Kumārajīva, mais dont l'intérêt sinologique l'emporte de loin sur la valeur indologique, il ne subsiste qu'un commentaire collectif mis sous le nom de Sengzhao et qui comprend des gloses attribuées nommément à Kumārajīva, à Sengzhao, à Zhu Daosheng, à Huirui, et à Daorong; c'est un document capital sur l'évolution de la pensée non seulement bouddhique en Chine à cette époque.<sup>12</sup>

Demieville suggests here that the sinological interest of this work far surpasses the Indological one. Along my research I came to agree upon this judgement; in fact, even though it is true that the annotations on the text (particularly Kumārajīva's ones) contain a great deal of references to many aspects of the Indian cultural world<sup>13</sup>, nevertheless the text as a whole (including its style and content) is addressed to a Chinese audience and aims primarily at clarifying ideas and conceptions presented in the sūtra by rephrasing them in terms familiar to the Chinese devotees. Moreover, it must be reminded that three of the commentators were Chinese "scholar-monks" with a quite limited knowledge of the Indian world and that Kumārajīva, who had lived in a Chinese cultural environment long enough for becoming acquainted with its fundamental characteristics, was fully aware of the fact that he had to adapt his teaching to a wholly different cultural environment even at the cost of sacrificing important features of the original message<sup>14</sup>. Under these premises, the choice of giving my research a strong "sinological" orientation, referring to the Indian Buddhist milieu only when needed is not only dictated by the necessity of clearly demarcating the field of investigation but is also required by the very nature of the material studied.

Second, including comments by a foreign missionary trained in India and Central-Asia such as Kumārajīva as well as those of three of his main Chinese disciples this text allows us to glimpse into their different approaches and exegetical strategies, and to make comparisons between them. In more general terms, it provides us with a privileged viewpoint on the complex and multi-faceted process of creative re-interpretation and appropriation of Buddhism during an age which constitutes a turning point in the long history of this momentous cultural acquisition<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Demieville 1987

<sup>13</sup> These references, which represent an important feature of Kumārajīva's exegesis, have been collected and discussed in chapt. 2 of this work.

<sup>14</sup> See as an example the famous passage in which Kumārajīva vividly illustrates to Sengrui the differences between the Indian and Chinese literary conventions (*Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], p. 332, b24-29): "The culture of Tianzhu [the Indian subcontinent] puts much emphasis on colourful diction and stylish writing. Their rhymed verse is always best when set to music. When granted an audience with the King, one always praises his virtues and achievements. In Buddhist rituals, odes of praise will be sung to show awe and respect. The gathas in the sutras are an example of such odes. But when the Fàn [Sanskrit] sūtras are translated into Chinese, the beauty of form and the colour and verve are lost. The meaning can generally be conveyed, but in a form very different from the original. It is like giving someone rice that you have chewed; he will find it not just tasteless, but downright disgusting." (translation from Cheung 2014, p. 94)

<sup>15</sup> As Zürcher explains, "[...] the development of a more accurate translation idiom and an enormous production of Chinese technical terms [...] reached its climax of activity and creativity after the arrival of Kumārajīva in Chang'an (402 CE) and the setting up of a veritable "translation project" which in the late fourth and early fifth century turned out a mass of translations of unprecedented quality. In close collaboration with his dozens of highly cultured Chinese assistants, Kumārajīva created a very fluent, eminently readable, and yet reasonably accurate translation

Third, being intimately intertwined with the translation of the sūtra (in fact, in this age exegesis and translation constituted two sides of the same process), this text allows us to better understand some aspects of this central Buddhist activity as it was organized during the early 5<sup>th</sup> century. As it is known, Buddhist translation for centuries represented the true motor of the spreading of this religion across China; as an organized and sustained activity, it has played a major role in the cultural history of the Middle Kingdom, leading over the centuries to the production of one of the world's largest collections of religious documents.

Fourth, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is a sūtra we are particularly well informed about, in fact no less than three Chinese versions of it have survived: besides Kumārajīva's one we also possess Zhi Qian's 支謙 (fl. 222 - 252 AD) one produced during the Three Kingdoms Period (likely between 222 and 229) and Xuanzang's 玄奘 (602 - 664) one dating 650 AD along with a large number of commentaries<sup>16</sup>; we are thus provided with invaluable material for comparing the different translation approaches and commentarial strategies<sup>17</sup>.

Fifth, the analysis of this work makes an important contribution to the study of Chinese philosophical commentarial literature as a genre, a research field which has been little frequented until quite recent times. As Rudolf Wagner has observed, research on commentarial literature in general has suffered from the disdain of the Reformation and Renaissance period for the dark ages of "scholasticism", whose production was regarded as second-hand thought: "the Urtext, the original meaning, and the author's original intention have since been extolled as the only proper focus of scholarly research, while the "prescientific" commentators and exegetes have been summarily denounced as subjectivist and unscholarly, bent on making their own points instead of explaining what was "really" meant by the text."<sup>18</sup> In the Chinese commentarial field, such disregard is all the more worrisome since in China classical texts were commonly read with the aid of commentaries at least since the second century AD, and commentary was actually the genre in which most Chinese thinkers exercised their talents.

### 3. Chinese philosophical commentaries and the hermeneutical perspective

Since the 1990s there has been a considerable production of sinological research on the interpretation of classical texts and their reception in later ages based upon the new hermeneutical perspectives opened up by philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Hans Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Gianni Vattimo and Umberto Eco.<sup>19</sup> From these works, which I briefly

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idiom which, together with its hundreds of new Chinese readings of Sanskrit terms, was soon taken over by subsequent translators." (Zürcher 2013, p. 119)

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the Chinese commentaries on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* see Wang Xinshui 2006, pp. 5 - 7. In the great majority of cases Chinese commentaries are based on Kumārajīva's version of the sūtra; a notable exception is represented by Kuiji's 窺基 (632 - 682) *Shuo Wugoucheng jing shu* 說無垢稱經疏 [T1782] which refers instead to Xuanzang's version.

<sup>17</sup> It must be reminded that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* survives also in Tibetan (it was translated in this language twice, the definitive version being completed in the ninth century by the well-known translator Chos Nid Tshul Khriims, [skrt. Dharmataśila]) and Sanskrit (a manuscript dating around 1150 was discovered in the library of the Potala Palace in Lhasa on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July 1999 by a Japanese équipe directed by Prof. Hisao Takahashi; the text has been published by the Taishō University in 2004). As it can be noticed, these versions are much later than the latest Chinese translation.

<sup>18</sup> Wagner 2000, p. 2

<sup>19</sup> This analytical approach adopted by a growing number of Western scholars is not common in Chinese scholarship. In fact, Chinese scholarly research (particularly in the field of humanities) tends not to be influenced so much by the more recent trends of Western philosophy and remains grounded in its own tradition of textual research and historical analysis. Even though it is in part true that - as Makeham puts it - "modern Chinese studies have too often overlooked the commentary's role as a genre of philosophical expression" (Makeham 2003, p. 4), nevertheless the works produced on this topic by scholars like Tang Yongtong, Tang Yijie, Wang Xiaoyi and Tang Yiming still constitute an invaluable vademecum for anyone who wants to venture into the field of early-Medieval Chinese exegesis. I have extensively studied their works (as well as others more recently published by other Chinese scholars) and greatly benefited from their insightful views.

mention below, I derived a great deal of inspiration, as well as many ideas on the different possible research approaches to texts and their commentaries.

Steven Van Zoeren's *Poetry and Personality* (1991), which was admittedly influenced by Gadamer's work<sup>20</sup>, has investigated the various interpretations of the *Book of Odes* elaborated in the course of Chinese history from those provided in the Confucian *Analects* to the Song Neoconfucian exegesis. In his introductory remarks the author claims that "the study of Chinese hermeneutics offers a perspective from which we may learn to understand the codes by which traditional Chinese texts were written and read". These "codes" are defined as the means by which the readers construct the meaning of a text; they are "social, learned phenomena that are, their apparent inevitability notwithstanding, provisional and historically specific"<sup>21</sup>.

In his *Two Visions of the Way* (1991) Alan Chan has focused upon two major commentaries on the *Laozi*, namely the *Wang Bi Commentary* (Three Kingdoms Period) and the *Heshang gong Commentary* (Later Han). He has reconstructed the historical background in which they were produced and, after dealing with them separately, he has undertaken a comparison between the two. While emphasizing the importance of these exegetical works which are in their own right "worth of serious attention" he states that:

The importance of traditional commentaries goes beyond the interpretation of the *Lao tzu* itself. They are crucial to our understanding of Chinese intellectual history as a whole, where, as Wolfgang Bauer so aptly puts it, "the most important thoughts emerge in Hermeneutics." In other words, the unfolding of Chinese intellectual history is characterized by a profound recognition of the power of tradition. New ideas take shape and blossom into view only as interpreters discern the words of the ancient sages, as they find new meanings in the older classics.

Beginning with the Han dynasty, commentaries have become the chief medium through which new insights were developed in traditional China. Individual commentators, to be sure, may employ different approaches in their work. Some may focus on grammatical or lexical explanations, while others discourse on the meaning of a text as a whole. The important point, however, remains that, sustained and informed by tradition, commentary is a form of interpretation in which the new arises out of the old, and the two are fused into a unified whole.<sup>22</sup>

J. B. Henderson, who is by training a sinologist, has gone as far as trying to discuss in a comparative and inter-cultural perspective the commentarial genre, its basic assumptions and strategies. As he declares, with his *Scripture, Canon and Commentary* (1991) he responds to Jonathan Z. Smith's call for "the study of comparative systematics and exegesis" and intends to contribute to what Hans-Georg Gadamer envisioned as "a critical history of hermeneutics, the study of its basic principles and strategies". In fact, the primary aim of the author's work is "to relate how commentators approached the classics, especially what assumptions they made regarding the character of these classics—for example, that they are consistent with one another—and how they dealt with problems in canonical texts that seemed to challenge or contravene such assumptions—for example, that they apparently contain contradictions." At the very basis of his comparative and inter-cultural approach is the fundamental observation that:

Commentaries and commentarial modes of thinking dominated the intellectual history of most premodern civilizations, a fact often obscured by the "great ideas" approach to the history of thought and by modern scholars' denigration of the works of mere exegetes and annotators. Until the seventeenth century in Europe, and even later in China, India, and the

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Van Zoeren 1991, p. 6: "[...] Although Gadamer writes from a Eurocentric perspective, his work has rich implications for those engaged in the study of culturally or historically remote works, and this study has been influenced and in a sense inspired by his insights".

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1



Near East, thought, especially within high intellectual traditions, was primarily exegetical in character and expression.<sup>23</sup>

This multi-cultural, diachronic and cross-field approach also underlies the collection of essays *Text und Kommentar* edited by the eminent Egyptologist Jan Assmann and published in Munich in 1995. Through its various sections it explores the theoretical basis of exegesis, the features of religious and philosophical commentaries, the literary purport of the commentarial genre, and the use of commentary in jurisprudence and in the arts. A fine contribution to the study of Chinese philosophical commentary is found in this collection, authored by the German sinologist Rudolf Wagner<sup>24</sup>.

Other important contributions to the research on Chinese commentarial literature include the complete English translation (with extended introductions and a substantial apparatus of notes) of two commentaries by Wang Bi 王弼 (226 - 249), namely the *The Zhouyi Commentary* (1994)<sup>25</sup> and *The Laozi Commentary* (1999)<sup>26</sup> undertaken by Richard John Lynn.

The works of Wang Bi have attracted the attention and interest of the sinologist Rudolf Wagner, who has dedicated three masterful studies to Wang Bi's *Laozi Commentary*; studies in which, having the famous Bible scholar Rudolf Bultmann as a model, he extends his investigation "from painstaking philological research through broad analyses of religious, social, and political currents, to hermeneutical explorations of the internal logic of philosophical texts and religious beliefs"<sup>27</sup>. The first study (2000)<sup>28</sup> focuses on Wang Bi's art and technique as a commentator, and the intellectual currents that formed the cultural background of his times. The second (2003)<sup>29</sup> provides a critical edition and annotated translation of the *Laozi weizhi lieli* 老子微指略例 (*Laozi Commentary and the Structure of the Laozi's Pointers*). The third (2003)<sup>30</sup> is a study of Wang Bi's philosophy of language as it is displayed in the commentary and of his political philosophy. This research "trilogy" shows a keen awareness of the hermeneutical issues involved in this kind of studies. No doubt, this particular sensibility also derived from the author's study of hermeneutics in Heidelberg for some years with Hans-Georg Gadamer.

In 2003 John Makeham has published another important study entitled *Transmitters and Creators: Chinese Commentators and Commentaries on the Analects* in which he has analyzed four commentaries on the Confucian *Analects* composed in different historical periods ranging from the mid-third century to the second half of the nineteenth century. In this valuable piece of research he has shown a keen concern for exegetical issues and has devoted a large part of his introduction (*Op. cit.* pp. 1 - 20) to the discussion of some key conceptions of Western philosophical hermeneutics, making references to such authorities in the field as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Hans Robert Jauss, Umberto Eco, Dominick LaCapra etc.

Lastly, another important study deserves to be mentioned, Daniel K. Gardner's *Zhu Xi's Reading of the Analects - Canon, Commentary, and the Classical Tradition* (2003) which investigates Zhu Xi's exegesis of the Confucian *Analects*; on the wider background is the momentous shift from the Five Classics<sup>31</sup> to the Four Books<sup>32</sup> as recognized authoritative "canon" and the adoption of a new metaphysical language created during the Song which led to new

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3

<sup>24</sup> «Der vergessene Hinweis. Wang Bi über den Lao-tsu» (in Assmann 1995, pp. 257 - 278)

<sup>25</sup> *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (1994)

<sup>26</sup> *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Tao-te Ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (1999)

<sup>27</sup> Wagner 2000, p. 1

<sup>28</sup> *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi*

<sup>29</sup> *A Chinese Reading of the Daodejing: Wang Bi's Commentary on the Laozi with Critical Text and Translation*

<sup>30</sup> *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)*

<sup>31</sup> Namely, the *Book of Changes*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Poetry*, the *Book of Rites*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*

<sup>32</sup> Namely, the *Greater Learning*, the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Mean*

distinctive readings of the ancient texts and a re-orientation in the search for their meaning. As it is explained in the introduction, the author's interest is two-folded:

While I am deeply interested in understanding Zhu's reading of the Analects and his redefinition of the tradition, no less significant here is my interest in exploring the genre of interlinear commentary and highlighting its importance and usefulness in the study of Chinese intellectual history. As a sort of reflection on the words and ideas of a text, interlinear commentary conveys the commentator's understanding of the meaning of the text while it shapes and conditions future readings and understandings of that text by others, both contemporaries and later generations. How interlinear commentary functions as a genre, how commentators themselves differently understand their responsibilities to the text and to their readers, how different commentaries lend different meanings to a text, how the understanding of a text depends on the particular commentary that accompanies it—these all are concerns motivating this book. In short, one of the book's principal objectives is exploring the role of interlinear commentary in the tradition of Chinese textual exegesis.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. Methodological approaches

The works mentioned above have inspired and influenced my research in many ways. In particular, they have allowed me, while dealing with the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*, to keep in mind the complexity implicit in the act of “interpreting”, along with the ineluctably historical nature of understanding: a text both contains and hides, it passes down tradition while leaving space for innovation; its words and phrases are always surrounded with a haze of ambiguity in such a way that its message inevitably presents a margin of indeterminacy. Commentaries written through the ages establish a dialogue with the text, they undertake a “negotiation” which eventually leads to the “extraction” of a certain meaning from within a range of possibilities allowed<sup>34</sup>, and this choice is never “neutral” or “innocent”, being strictly related to the needs/intentions of the exegete who thinks and operates within the horizon of his own age and cultural milieu<sup>35</sup>. It is thanks to this complex act of interpretation that the past becomes alive and meaningful again; far from being reified once for all into an immutable distant shape, it comes to be regarded as an intimate voice which still speaks to men's heart and mind, and have a powerful transforming influence both on a personal and social level.

For what regards the adoption of hermeneutical theories and approaches in textual studies, following Gadamer<sup>36</sup> I would say that I do not regard hermeneutics as a set of rules or procedures to be followed mechanically when analyzing texts and commentaries. Rather, I consider it as a “science of awareness” which can guide the philologist and the historian in their interpretative work. With regard to the commentary studied here, in the first place hermeneutics has triggered in myself a number of curiosities and helped me formulate the basic research questions: what is the specific commentarial approach developed by the three main authors of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*? How do these interpretations interact with each-other? What significance do they bear within the wider cultural background of the early 5<sup>th</sup> century China? In which ways was the practice of Buddhist translation related to the exegetical one and how did

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<sup>33</sup> Gardner 2003, pp. 3-4

<sup>34</sup> As a matter of fact, the criteria for determining the “allowed range of interpretation”, and hence the “faithfulness” to the text, are also a cultural production.

<sup>35</sup> As Wagner puts it, when discussing the confucian Analects, “[...] Once the text is read through the commentary, the relative openness of the “raw” statement in the Analects cedes to closure of meaning through the commentary's addition of the historical context, a possible dialogic situation with a particular historical interlocutor and even the grammatical subject of the statement. This closed meaning again does not stand alone but confronts, borrows from, or rejects other, already available closed meanings. The rejected options appear as markers of stress in this text-commentary ensemble, and these markers highlight the given commentary's particular agenda.” (Wagner 2006, p. 596)

<sup>36</sup> “[the] work [of hermeneutics] is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions under which understanding takes place” (*Truth and Method*, passage quoted in Makeham 2003, p. 13)

they interact with one another? What was the role played by exegesis in the cultural adaptation of Buddhism to the Chinese *milieu*? Which elements of the Chinese mainstream cultural tradition served as a “bridge” for approaching and “decoding” Indian ideas and systems of thought? How and for what reasons were the materials of the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* edited, assembled and transmitted through the ages?

In the second place, hermeneutics helped me develop a variety of methodological approaches which I have applied for clarifying specific issues and bringing to light some particular features of the text studied. For example, in my work I have often resorted to a diachronic and comparative approach comparing Kumārajīva’s renderings and the related explanations to the different interpretations previously provided by Zhi Qian (his version was consulted by the Kuchean master during the translation) and later on by Xuanzang; I have constantly referred to the historical and social background trying to contextualize as much as possible the documents analyzed; I have always kept together the Buddhist and Confucian exegetical traditions and - so to speak - looked at them synoptically; I have tried to give preeminence to a broader cultural perspective (including history, social practices, literary conventions etc.) instead of articulating my discussion around such narrow and often misleading (because hard to define and characterize cross-culturally) categories as “religion” and “philosophy”.

In this way, solicited with different questions and approaches, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* has become a knowledgeable witness of its age, able to reveal events, to describe intellectual vicissitudes and hermeneutic ventures, thus shedding light on many different issues like a prism reverberating light in different directions.

As a general norm I have chosen to give ample space to the original texts and base my arguments on the analysis and discussion of the information provided in the sources themselves. To be sure, one of the qualities of this work is the ample choice of translated excerpts, not only from the commentary itself but also from many other important sources which are here made available in English for the first time. When dealing with these ancient texts I have greatly benefited from the substantial advancement in the study of Medieval Chinese language started in the 1990s<sup>37</sup> which has led over the years to the publishing of many useful specialized studies, dictionaries and grammars (see for example the works by Dong Zhiqiao, Fang Yixin, Cai Jinghao, Wang Yunlu etc.)<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> For a good historical overview see Wang Yunlu 2001

<sup>38</sup> The findings of the above mentioned scholars - whose works are listed in bibliography - have contributed to make my translations more accurate and reliable. In fact, numerous instances of Medieval Chinese linguistic phenomena are found throughout the *Commentary* (as well as in many other sources used for this work), and it would have been hardly possible to deal with them by relying exclusively on “conventional” grammars and dictionaries of Classical Chinese. Just to provide a few examples: 復 and 自 used after adverbs as suffixes, without actual meaning (for ex. 雖復, 無復, 不復, 已自, 深自, 本自, 便自); 物 for 人; 一切 with the meaning of “all the people”, “everybody”; 偏 and 殊 used as intensifiers before adjectives (for ex. 偏重, 殊好, 殊妙, 殊勝); 良 and 良在 used with the adverbial meaning of “certainly”, “surely”; 應時 used before a verb with the adverbial meaning of “immediately”, “at once”; 在 used as a particle indicating the continuous aspect of the preceding verb (for ex. 順在); 見 used before a verb as a pronoun substituting the direct object (for ex. 見敬 = 敬之); 端正 for “beautiful (mostly referred to a person’s appearance)”; 消息 with the meaning of “to ponder”, “to carefully consider” or - in other contexts - “to convalesce”, “to take good care of oneself [after illness]”; 不計 with the adverbial meaning of “no matter”, “regardless”; 自餘 with the meaning of 其餘; 轉 as an adverb indicating “even more” (for ex. 轉深).

The in-depth discussion of these and other interesting linguistic features of the *Commentary* - which I originally intended to provide in a dedicated Appendix of this work - will constitute instead the subject of a future separate study. This notwithstanding, here in this work I have related some relevant lexical and linguistic information through *ad hoc* footnotes.

## 5. Outline of this thesis

In this thesis I will look at the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* from a number of different perspectives, each of those being articulated into one chapter and centered upon a specific concept. These are: 1. translation; 2. interpretation; 3. editing and transmission. Given the fact that these topics are intimately intertwined with each other, the inclusion of certain contents in one specific chapter may sometimes be to some extent arbitrary.

**The first chapter** focuses on translation. The materials included in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* represent in part a “side-product” of the translation process as it was organized at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and for this reason I start with sketching out a “genealogy” of the Buddhist translation activity in the city of Chang’an investigating the evolution of its approaches and techniques. In particular, I will stress the importance of Dao’an’s 道安 (312 - 385) new awareness about the translated Buddhist texts; as he clearly realized, notwithstanding their sacred nature, they were nevertheless inevitably subjected to oversights and mistakes. So, rather than wasting exegetical efforts for explaining mistranslated passages or trying to forcefully make sense of Indian categories by superimposing on them patterns derived from Chinese thought (*geyi* 格義), it would have been much more reasonable to focus instead on the translation process improving its procedures and consequently also the quality of its output.

This new awareness, which finds an echo in (and was perhaps inspired by) the more rigorous and “philological” approach to the Classics developed during the Eastern Han (206 BC - 220 AD) by Confucian exegetes like Ma Rong 馬融 (79 - 166) and Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127 - 200), gave the translation activity a pivotal role in the understanding of the foreign religion. And it is thanks to the foundational role played by the state-financed translation enterprise directed by Dao’an himself under the Former Qin 前秦 (350 - 394) that later on Kumārajīva’s one could be so productive and successful. In fact, not only did the Kuchean master benefit from the precious help of a highly experienced group of Chinese collaborators trained under Dao’an, he also profited from the deep critical reflections of the old Chinese monk on many practical issues involved in the translation activity which were in part crystallized in the set of guidelines known as “the five instances of losing the source and three difficulties” (*wu shiben, san buyi* 五失本, 三不易); in fact, as we know from the sources, these guidelines remained authoritative in Chang’an till at least the first years of Kumārajīva’s era.

**The second chapter** focuses on interpretation. It examines the three major commentaries included in T1775 also in the light of the cultural back-ground and the life trajectory of each author.

Along with the content of the three commentaries, my analysis puts a special emphasis on the cultural modes of reception, something which entails a discussion of the “formal features” of the those works. Following Gadamer’s reflections on the topic, I hold that in the context of a cross-cultural exchange the cultural background and world-view of the “receiver”, far from being a limitation or a “disturbing/distorting factor” hindering the “correct” reception of foreign ideas<sup>39</sup>,

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<sup>39</sup> This seems to be the presupposition Robinson has in mind when discussing early Mādhyamika in India and China. For example, he argues: “Sengzhao, before becoming a Buddhist, acquired a secular education by reading the texts that he was transcribing in his job as a copyist. In this way, he was perhaps less heavily indoctrinated than if he had studied the classics in a secular school. His first introduction to Buddhism was by way of a Sūnyavādin text. Thus he had comparatively little to unlearn when he went to study with Kumārajīva, and yet he was sufficiently informed to appreciate his master’s lectures” (Robinson 1967, p. 159).

Elsewhere Robinson aptly observes that “A number of Indian features were not adopted by Chinese Mādhyamikas, the most obvious of which is Indian literary forms. The Chinese at this period declined to write śāstras and continued resolutely to prefer the native literary modes - the preface, the essay, and the commentary”, but then he - quite funnily - blames them for such an “irresponsible” choice: “The śāstra, though, is a valuable component of the Indian tradition, and the Chinese in the fifth century would have profited by its adoption. The full architectonic

constitute the very pre-conditions of the reception itself; they represent the horizon within which “the other” can appear and be seen, analyzed and interpreted. It goes without saying that such horizon is by no means closed neither immutable, being always subjected to the effects of history and susceptible to change.

The cultural horizon of the exegetes who authored the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* is an *a priori* which remains largely “hidden” and unconscious to themselves, to the point that it is almost never critically defined and discussed by them; it is revealed, however, more clearly than elsewhere in the “forms” unwittingly employed in the exegetical activity, particularly the specific exegetical formats adopted, the literary style, the modes of exposition and argumentation, the articulation of the philosophical views.

Hence, in this case my guiding research questions will not be “*What* did the Chinese exegetes grasp of Indian Buddhism? To which degree of “correctness” did they manage to understand the Indian theories?”, but rather “*How* did they understand the foreign doctrines? Which elements of the Chinese cultural background of the times came into play and turned into “receptors” allowing the acquisition of Indian Buddhism? *Why* those elements and not other ones?”

***Kumārajīva’s commentary*** - My analysis shows that at the basis of Kumārajīva’s exegesis is the effort to introduce the Chinese audience to the broader Indian cultural context in which Buddhism as a religion and a way of life had arisen and developed. In fact, he seems to be deeply aware that without providing such framework he could hardly convey the Buddhist tenets and ideas.

In terms of translation he had to find a viable middle way between domestication and foreignization<sup>40</sup>, and he did so by carefully combining translation and exegesis. For example, in many cases, when rendering Sanskrit terms and expressions in Chinese, he chose to use phonetic transliterations instead of simply finding equivalents in the Chinese cultural sphere which, albeit misleading, would have been easily approachable to the public. Transliterations were intended to “sound foreign” and put the reader on alert, thus making him aware of the cultural diversity; they created a gap which was bridged over by a thorough oral explanation. In this way exegesis became a potent tool mediating between the two extremes of “domestication” and “foreignization” which every translation work has to deal with.

In more technical terms, Kumārajīva’s exegesis is constructed upon a number of “building blocks” which I analyze in this work. The first is constituted by the explanation of Sanskrit words, often enriched by etymologies and examples; sometimes comprehensive explanations are supplied which exceed the meaning of a word in its specific context and are formulated in a sort of “dictionary-entry” style. These explanations, exemplary as they are for their precision, clarity and concision, became foundational in many respects: in fact, being considered as authoritative

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intricacy of Indian Buddhist philosophy can only be conveyed through extensive and systematic expositions. The exercise in reasoning at length and correlating numerous components would have been instructive for Chinese students of the Dharma. The reason for their failure to adopt the Indian literary form at this time may be detected in Huiyuan’s discourse on Indian and Chinese literary modes. Evidently the gentlemen of the time found it easier to change their religion than their literary ideas” (Robinson 1967, p. 161).

<sup>40</sup> Venuti’s definition of these two terms (which I have adopted here) is directly based on Schleiermacher analysis: “In an 1813 lecture on the different methods of translation, Schleiermacher argued that “there are only two. Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him”. Admitting (with qualifications like “as much as possible”) that translation can never be completely adequate to the foreign text, Schleiermacher allowed the translator to choose between a domesticating method, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home, and a foreignizing method, an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad.” (Venuti 1995, pp. 19 - 20)

reference material, they were to be quoted in many important Buddhist lexicographic works of later times<sup>41</sup>.

Related to this kind of explanations are the references made to the Sanskrit text (28 occurrences) for better specifying the meaning of certain words. This practice is often used by Kumārajīva for backing up his assessments (some of which clearly derogatory) of the corresponding Chinese terms chosen by the exegetes or scribes in the translation. These passages, which are mostly introduced by the expression “the Sanskrit version says” (*fanben yun* 梵本云), reveal once more the complexity of the organization of the translation ground and its procedures; in fact, the “translator” of the sūtra was very far from having control on the final translation output, to the point that he might disagree with some of the Chinese renderings adopted when re-checking the final version.

Not only did Kumārajīva explain in detail the sūtra text, he also expanded on it enriching his exegesis with a variety of additional materials. One of these expansions might be called “elucidation of categories”. In the text terms are found which were traditionally included in a certain category (for example “material nourishment” 揣食 was included in the category of the “four nourishments” 四食) or which represent themselves a category of elements (for example Māra 魔 (the destroyer) includes four (or even more) kinds of “destroyers”). Those words offered the chance to the Kuchean translator to elaborate on the terms associated with them thus making the explanation more far-reaching and exhaustive. These categories and their memorization played an important role in Indian Buddhist (and extra-Buddhist) education; given that their content encompassed a wide range of topics, probably Kumārajīva thought such expository device could represent an easy and effective way of introducing a Chinese audience to the Indian cultural universe.

Other expansions on the text are provided for different purposes. Some are intended to supply background information on Indian society, lore and traditions; these range from Brahmanic practices to social organization and everyday city life, from Indian medicine to botany etc. Some others offer background information on the characters which are mentioned in the text (both Buddhist and non-Buddhist), sometimes in a very concise way, sometimes more in detail. Anecdotes are also told, in which the main character is usually played by a Buddhist figure; written in a fine narrative style, many of these “expansions” are meant to clarify the text of the sūtra by providing a dramatized explanation of an abstract conception. In other cases, when key philosophical concepts are met, they are elucidated through proper philosophical and doctrinal discussions.

As a whole, Kumārajīva’s exegesis constitutes a captivating blend of Indian patterns of oral exposition, Central Asian storytelling and Chinese philological exercise. The most evident proof of its oral origins is to be found in some question-and-answer debates between Kumārajīva and the audience that were recorded by the scribes and have been preserved within the text. To understand which foreign and Chinese practices served as models in setting the organization of the translation ground and its procedures would no doubt allow us to appreciate some new features of Kumārajīva’s commentary; this is, however, an extremely complicated subject and we are still far from answering the many questions involved in it. Even so, I have argued that the early-5<sup>th</sup> century translation enterprise borrowed many elements from two important modes of oral discussion already well established in China, namely the “pure conversations” (*qingtān* 清談) and the *dujiang*-system 都講.

**Sengzhao’s commentary** - While Kumārajīva’s commentary largely derives from the oral exegesis he performed side by side with the translation of the sūtra, the materials included in

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, the important *Collection of Terms and their Explanations [in Buddhist] Translations* (*Fanyi mingyi ji* 翻譯名義集) [T2131] by Fayun 法雲 (1088 - 1158, Southern Song dynasty) which borrows heavily from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*.



Sengzhao's comment are more varied. They comprise at least three components. The first one includes speculative passages in which philosophical conceptions are expressed through carefully constructed argumentative structures mainly written in the parallel prose style (*pianwen* 駢文). These materials, which are based upon a comprehensive and highly structured understanding of the sūtra as a coherent unit, form a continuum with the Xuanxue exegesis (in particular, they share many features of Wang Bi's exegesis of the *Laozi*) and constitute perhaps the most original part of Sengzhao's commentary: by grafting the Indian Mādhyamika philosophy into these patterns familiar to the Chinese mind, the Chinese monk was able to "betray" the original formulation while saving and cross-culturally transmitting its inner meaning.

The second component of Sengzhao's commentary is made of passages that show a clear connection to Kumārajīva's commentary; they include Sengzhao's paraphrases of the master's explanation in which the same content is expressed with a slightly different wording or even *verbatim* transcribed (albeit sometimes adding some interesting remarks that reveal his Chinese standpoint and background), plus entries relating information on Sanskrit terms, Indian traditions, parables etc. which had been evidently heard from the master but were not recorded in Kumārajīva's comment.

The third component includes passages containing explanations which are significantly different from or alternative to Kumārajīva's comment. This category includes also many original explanations in which Sengzhao draws freely from the Chinese philosophical tradition (particularly from *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* and the *Yijing*<sup>42</sup>) and adapts those materials to the Buddhist milieu and to the specific needs of his exegesis. A particularly interesting element of this component is the construction of the figure of "Perfect Man" (*zhiren* 至人), a spiritual model which had first appeared in the *Zhuangzi* and was afterwards elaborated by Zhi Dun 支遁 (314 - 366) who first adapted it to the Buddhist milieu.

**Daosheng's commentary** - According to the sources, Daosheng's commentary was written after the former two. It probably dates to the period immediately following the monk's return from Chang'an to the South (408) and has been constructed on the basis of the notes previously taken during the translation of the sūtra itself (406). In his exegesis Daosheng neither shows a special interest for the Indian cultural background nor seems to be concerned about framing his views into a particular literary form like Sengzhao did. The most striking feature of his commentary is perhaps the adoption of the Xuanxue language theory claiming that the words of a text could not exhaustively convey the message the Sages of old had in mind; they were but traces left by them, just an aid for grasping their original intention<sup>43</sup>. Daosheng developed this assumption into an effective heuristic method which allowed him to find out the truth beyond words; this approach represented an original "middle way" between the two extremes of "holding stubbornly to the surface text" and "discarding the text *tout court* for accessing the truth only by relying on the intuition of the heart/mind". Otherwise stated, Daosheng was able to grasp the Buddha's message not by looking *at* the text, but rather by looking *through* it. The elaboration of this method is likely to have been stimulated also by the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* itself, this being a sūtra particularly concerned about the topic of language and its relation to true reality.

<sup>42</sup> Starting from the Wei-Jin period these three texts were collectively called the Three Mysteries (*san xuan* 三玄) and represented a sort of "canon" for the Xuanxue exegetes

<sup>43</sup> Xuanxue philosophers developed this language theory on the basis of passages contained in *Laozi*, *Yijing* and particularly *Zhuangzi* (for example: "The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?" (*Zhuangzi*, *Waiwu* 外物 (*External Things*), transl. from Watson 2013, p. 233); "Laozi said [to Confucius:] '[...] The Six Classics are the traces left by the Ancient Kings, but they are not "that by which" they have left them. Now, what you are speaking about (i.e. the Six Classics) are but traces. And the traces are left by the shoes, but they are not the shoes themselves"' (*Zhuangzi*, *Tianyun* 天運 (*The Turning of Heaven*)).

Daoseng's annotations do not accompany the full text sentence by sentence, but tend instead to focus on specific passages of interest; here a topic is explained and contextualized into the broader background of the author's world-view. The interest of the commentary lies in the fact that it contains *in nuce* some important conceptions (e.g. the Buddha-nature theory, the characterization of Buddha as the Principle - *li* 理 -, or cosmic truth pervading the universe) which Daosheng would further develop in later works such as the *Lotus sūtra Commentary* and the *Nirvāṇa sūtra Commentary*. These philosophical ideas will in turn become key notions in the Chinese Buddhism of the subsequent ages.

Since Daosheng's exegetical style and approach are very much determined by his particular personality and his overall religious and intellectual experience, the contextualization of his exegesis within the broader background of his complex life trajectory and philosophical formation is in this case particularly revealing.

**The third chapter** focuses on the editing and transmission of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*. In it I will collect and discuss the most relevant available evidence regarding the textual history of the commentary from its composition up to its first printing. By relying on internal evidence (particularly the various insertions made by the editors) and on a vast range of external sources (manuscripts from Dunhuang and Turfan, historical materials, travel diaries, bibliographical catalogues of official and private libraries etc.) I will reconstruct some important passages leading to the formation of this text that had previously not been considered. Along such discussion the reader will be able to glimpse some of the Chinese cultural modes of dealing with scriptures, e.g. how the Chinese *literati* constructed them, how they selected and combined together different materials, how and why they chose to pass them down etc. These modes, which imply the intervention of numerous cultural and social forces, allowed Chinese *literati* to continuously reshape tradition and keep it meaningful and alive through the ages in a fashion that very much resembles the exegetical activity, albeit operating on a much bigger scale, within a broader time period, and involving a much larger number of actors.

The textual history of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* is engaging since its very beginning given that - as it seems - two different Chinese versions of the sūtra were produced one after another by Kumārajīva: the first (of which only few fragments survive in *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 [T1509] and *Dasheng dayi zhang* 大乘義章 [T1851]) was titled *Pimoluojie jing* 毘摩羅詰經 and was probably written down by Sengrui; the second was called *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經 (the version that has been passed down to us), it represented an improvement of the former and was probably written down by Sengzhao. Some evidence makes us believe that Kumārajīva's comment to the first version was in some cases substantially modified in the second.

After their composition, exegetical materials related to this scripture must have circulated in the form of independent commentaries for some time before four of them were assembled into a collective commentary. As we know from the sources, Sui exegetes like Zhiyi 智顗 (538 - 597) and Jizang 吉藏 (549 - 623) consulted this early compilation which was edited during the Southern dynasties, most likely under the Southern Liang 南梁 (502 - 557).

During the Sui a new kind of exegesis was started by state-sponsored exegetes like the above mentioned Zhiyi and Jizang. Their approach was eminently interpretative and aimed at developing on the basis of a certain sūtra a set of original theories which would lay the foundations of distinctively Chinese Buddhist sects<sup>44</sup>. On imperial request, Zhiyi had composed a series of new commentaries on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* which were later adopted as the official interpretation of the text; as a consequence, the old Guanzhong exegesis became obsolete and felt into oblivion.

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<sup>44</sup> Zhiyi is considered the actual founder of Tiantai sect, whereas Jizang was the founder of the Three Treatises school.



Only during the mid-Tang period the Guanzhong exegesis of this text started to enjoy new attention. By that time the interpretative commentaries had become so intricate and chaotic that could hardly serve as an aid for the neophytes to approach the scriptures; this is why Daoye 道液, a Tiantai monk involved in the translation and proselytizing activities at the capital Chang'an, decided to look back to the old Guanzhong exegesis, which was much more clear and accessible: his *Jingming jing Guanzhong shu* 淨名經關中疏 - a commented edition of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* mainly based on the Guanzhong exegesis - became a popular primer for the devotees who wanted to study the sūtra. And it is likely that Daoye's work served as a model for the editors of the commentary *Zhu Weimojie jing* [T1775] in 10 fascicles.

It was under the Northern Song that the commentary in 10 fascicles underwent what was probably the last complete revision and collation before being printed and included in the Buddhist Canon. Revision was undertaken by a group of high-ranking Confucian scholars officially appointed as scribes at the Institute for the Translation of the Sūtras ” (*Yi jing yuan* 譯經院), an institution established at the capital Bianjing 汴京 (the present-day Kaifeng) in the year 980 at the orders of Emperor Taizu 太祖 (r. 960 - 976) who wanted to revive the activity of translation of the Buddhist scriptures.

## 6. Boundaries of this research

To characterize a research project also means to define its scope by setting limitations. The commentary I deal with is consistent in size and content and the annotations it contains belong to three distinct commentators which are among the most important and influential Buddhist personalities of their time; even though their paths converged in Chang'an at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, their intellectual development and world-view are very different. For this reason, to focus on this text, contextualize the various exegetical approaches and detect through them some of the dynamics and mechanisms determining the Chinese “conquest” of the Buddhist message constituted in my opinion a topic of research enough well defined and circumscribed.

Being so, I have put aside other uses that could have been done of the commentary. For example, this could have been used as an effective aid for comparing the Sanskrit and Chinese versions of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*; or else, it could have been studied side by side with Chinese commentaries of later ages (something which I have done here, but not systematically).

Moreover, I did not venture into an in-depth investigation of the influence of Indian Buddhist forms of exegesis and preaching on the Guanzhong commentaries (in particular Kumārajīva's one). The choice not to deal with this aspect is due in the first place to the necessity of limiting my work by focusing mainly on the Chinese cultural milieu, and in the second to the fact that Indian sources on this subject (*viz.* the exegesis of early Mahāyāna Buddhist texts) are indeed very limited. As Jonathan Silk has pointed out in his article «Taking the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* seriously»:

The relative paucity of quotations of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in Indian works contrasts sharply with the rate at which a number of other sūtra texts are cited in Indian treatises, texts such as the *Adhyāśayasamcodana*, the *Tathāgataguhyaka*, the *Samādhirāja*, and the *Śālistamba*, not to mention the larger *Prajñāpāramitā*. It also bears mention that there is no known Indian commentary on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, although compared to the total number of such scriptures, there are very few Indian commentaries, extant or lost, on any Mahāyāna sūtras at all, a circumstance which requires its own investigation. Given the relative (in)frequency with which the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is cited in Indian literature, we are compelled to conclude that it was not a very important or popular text in India either, at least among those who composed Buddhist philosophical literature.

Generally speaking, the study of early Mahāyāna Buddhist exegesis in India is bound to rely mainly on materials which survive only in Chinese and present big problems of attribution<sup>45</sup>. We possess, for example, a number of commentarial works ascribed to Indian exegetes like Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu like T1509, but also such texts as T1510, T1511, T1513, T1514, T1519, T1520, T1521, T1522, T1523, T1524, T1526, T1527, T1531, and T1532. The study of these materials (to which not many studies have been devoted so far<sup>46</sup>) would require an amount of work and imply a series of tasks which are far beyond the scope of the present work. Another viable approach would be to study early Indian non-Buddhist exegetical materials which, again, survive in Chinese translation<sup>47</sup>, but this would deserve a dedicated investigation.

## 7. Concluding remarks

To conclude these introductory considerations, I wish to point out how the conception of “cultural horizon” which has been previously considered applies to the author of this work as much as to the Buddhist exegetes that are the object of his investigation. As a matter of fact, I am inevitably conditioned by the cultural forces of my age; forces that I can only partially be aware of.

One of the motives that silently triggered this research is perhaps the interest towards the topic of translation as cross-cultural communication *par excellence* enhanced by the process of globalization. Ruegg has already detected the influence of this force on contemporary Buddhist studies and aptly described it:

In our times, globalization and dialogue between civilizations are beholden to translators and their translations. The ever-growing concern with translation in Tibetan and Buddhist studies may be seen as a move in the direction of a closer and deeper engagement with what is contemporary, and with a worldwide public, in a field of highly specialized study that has often been perceived as bearing only on the ancient and antiquarian, the remote and the ‘other’.<sup>48</sup>

Buddhist textual studies can no doubt speak to a worldwide public and contribute to the contemporary debates triggered by the globalization process. They can actually deepen and broaden our understanding of the encounter and dialogue between civilizations, the ancient Buddhist world being in fact a real goldmine of concrete examples of inter-cultural religious, philosophical and linguistic borrowings and exchanges.

How are religious and philosophical ideas transmitted from one culture to the other? How are systems of thought “crumbled into pieces” and then re-structured within a different cultural framework? How do different cultures influence one another with new conceptions and how do these “imported elements” become productive and contribute to the cultural growth of a civilization? During this research I always had these questions and concerns swirling in my mind. Hence, in spite of producing a specialized study I hope that the Indo-Chinese cross-cultural dialogue and exchange that emerges from the following pages can interest a wider readership and provide it with some food for thought.

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<sup>45</sup> I wish to thank Michael Radich for the information he kindly provided me on this complicated subject, including bibliography and ideas about possible research approaches (e-mail exchange, July 2016)

<sup>46</sup> Among the most important ones it deserves mention the work of Otake Susumu 大竹 晋, who has studied and translated some of the commentaries ascribed to Vasubandhu. See Otake Susumu 2013.

<sup>47</sup> For example, there exist a couple of early commentaries on the *Sāṅkhyā-kārikā* (including T2137, *Jin qishi lun* 金七十論, translated by Paramārtha 真諦), on grammatical literature, etc.

<sup>48</sup> Ruegg 2016, pp. 199 - 200

## INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW OF THE *VIMALAKĪRTINIRDEŚA* AND ITS RECEPTION IN CHINA

Given that the study of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* I am about to undertake directly relates to the narrative, the literary features and the philosophical content of the sūtra itself, I shall start with providing an essential outline of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* along with some basic information about its reception in China.

### 1. An outline of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*<sup>49</sup> is an early Mahāyāna sūtra composed in India probably at the beginning of the Common Era<sup>50</sup>. Flavored with a fine humor that does not spare even the Buddhist Law, concise and with a well constructed plot, it has been considered by Lamotte (who translated it in 1962) as “perhaps the crowning jewel of the Buddhist Literature of the Great Vehicle”<sup>51</sup>.

The scripture opens with the great assembly gathered in the Āmrapālī garden of Vaiśālī to listen to the exposition of the Dharma delivered by the Buddha. A group of five hundred elders’ sons<sup>52</sup> who had generated the intention to achieve *anuttarā samyaksaṃbodhi* (complete, perfect enlightenment) join the great event and one of them - *Baoji* 寶積, Jewel Accumulation - asks the Buddha to explain to the bodhisattvas the practices by which a land is purified. The World-honored One illustrates that the bodhisattvas acquire a Buddha land only in order to convert and save the sentient beings, and that the purity of this land ultimately resides in the virtues and religious merits of the bodhisattvas themselves: it is according to the purity of their mind that their buddha land is pure.

The figure of Vimalakīrti is then introduced. Originally an inhabitant of the “pure land” of the Buddha Akṣobhya, this bodhisattva has come to this land for converting and saving the beings. Disguised as a rich householder residing in Vaiśālī, he uses his status and wealth for attracting the beings and for preaching the dharma to them. A true embodiment of the Mahāyāna tenets, his personality is a bewildering host of contradictions: he is celibate but has children, goes to brothels but is chaste, is rich but without desire etc.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> For an analysis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, including its structure, its philosophical content and its influence, and an overview of previous research on the subject in mainland China and Taiwan see Wang Xinhui 2009

<sup>50</sup> The exact date in which the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was composed is unknown. Lamotte argues that this should be placed not later than the 2<sup>nd</sup> century (see Lamotte 1987, p. 77); the *terminus ad quem* is still provided by the first Chinese translation, i.e. the *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經 [T 474] produced by Zhi Qian between 222 and 229 AD. Based on the stylistic and linguistic analysis of the Sanskrit version discovered in 1999 at the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Fussman adds that “on peut donc reconnaître au moins trois «mains» dans ce texte dont l’unité foncière ne fait cependant pas de doute: c’est un texte très savamment composé, pas un texte fait de bric et de broc. Ces trois «mains» supposent une élaboration assez longue, peut-être trois générations, et laissent supposer l’existence d’une première version vers 100 de n. è au plus tard” (Fussman 2009, p. 646)

<sup>51</sup> Lamotte 1987, p. V

<sup>52</sup> The term “elders” (*zhang zhe* 長者, Skt. *grhapatī*) indicates in this context rich men, persons of means and social standing. Cf. the detailed explanation of this word in May 1967.

<sup>53</sup> According to Silk’s interesting reading of the sūtra (Silk 2014), Vimalakīrti clearly represents a figure of “immense improbability” which was regarded by the authors and the Indian audience to which the scripture was originally addressed as unreal and fictional as “32,000 lion thrones being placed in a small room without shrinking the thrones or enlarging the room, and so on”. As to the authorship of this work, Silk adds that “like so many other earlier Mahāyāna sūtras, when examined closely the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* too comes to look more and more like an extremely conservative, even reactionary, work. If my placement of the sūtra in this respect is correct, it comes out of a world in which the layman was so far removed from the monk that a suggestion of his spiritual superiority is on a par with the suggestion of the spiritual superiority of a woman, namely, unthinkable and absurd. That the likelihood of this reading has not suggested itself to modern audiences is likely due to the ways in which we moderns have (re)constructed Mahāyāna Buddhist ideology, especially under the strong influence of Japanese sectarianism” (*Ibidem*, p. 179). Silk’s interpretation represents no doubt an interesting hypothesis, which however does not seem to be supported by Kumārajīva’s commentary; in fact, in no place does the Kucheian master clearly

Expert in the skillful use of upāya, Vimalakīrti pretends to be ill, and thus can receive the visit of innumerable thousands of beings coming to inquire about his state of health. In such way, a magnificent stage is prepared on which the exposition of the doctrine can take place. While lying in bed, Vimalakīrti addresses his guests: he despises the physical body, which is impermanent and subject to decay and disintegration, and invites the audience to wish instead for the body of Buddha, which is the Dharma-body generated through immeasurable wisdom and merit.

The Buddha too wishes to be informed on Vimalakīrti's illness and asks in sequence ten different disciples and four bodhisattvas to go see him on his behalf. Yet, one after another they decline the request and relate in craftily constructed narrative flashbacks the circumstances in which during a previous life they had met Vimalakīrti and had been outsmarted and even ridiculed by him, his superior wisdom being no match for them. These dialogues are characterized by a strong *vis polemica* against the Hīnayāna, and present the Mahāyāna re-interpretation of many central Buddhist activities like meditation, teaching, begging etc.

Finally, the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (traditionally considered as the embodiment of prajñā - wisdom -)<sup>54</sup> accepts the task and goes to pay a visit to Vimalakīrti followed by a huge congregation of bodhisattvas, great disciples and gods. A magnificent Dharma gathering can thus commence: in a *crescendo* of philosophical acumen and doctrinal insight gods and bodhisattvas discuss a number of major Mahāyāna tenets (e.g. the amazing powers of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas, the transcendent nature of the Buddha-body, the conception of non-duality, etc.), the "speculative zenith" of their discussion being reached in chapter 9 where after numerous wonderful expositions of the teaching of non-duality (Skr. *advaya*) Vimalakīrti, invited by Mañjuśrī to expose to the congregation his own understanding of it, keeps silent.

Noon comes and Vimalakīrti, having sensed that Śāriputra is wondering in his mind about what all those bodhisattvas would eat, feeds the whole assembly with fragrant food fetched from a country named Host of Fragrances located in a different world-system by a bodhisattva conjured *ad hoc* for this purpose. Upon lunch, Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti decide to go see the Buddha in the Āmrāpālī garden - the place in which the narration had started - in order to revere him and make offerings along with the bodhisattvas. During the meeting both Śākyamuni Buddha and Vimalakīrti expose new wonderful teachings for the benefit of the audience. On Buddha's request to show the congregation the place where he had lived and died before being reborn in the present world, Vimalakīrti manifests the pure land of Wondrous Joy (Abhirati) whose Buddha is named Akṣobhya, along with its ornamentations, the pure practices of its bodhisattvas and the purity of its disciples.

In the last two chapters - which are quite conventional pieces - the scripture describes the merits one can obtain by reciting or copying the text, preserving it and passing it down to posterity.

As Hamlin explains in his interesting analysis of the sūtra<sup>55</sup>, the whole plot develops around two "dramatic axes", the first being the Buddha preaching in the Āmrāpālī garden who is described as symbolically projecting the entire universe over his head, and the second being Vimalakīrti lying in bed at his house. A peculiar tension is created between the figures of the Buddha and that of the bodhisattva; a tension which is resolved in the last three chapters witnessing the long-awaited meeting between the two: in Vimalakīrti's eyes, "the Buddha is nothing but an interplay of opposites, an inexpressible being whose nature eludes human concepts", while the bodhisattva, "juxtaposed between the buddhic order and the saṃsāric [...]"

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state that the above mentioned paradoxes "of immense improbability" are intended to be purely fictional. On the contrary, he is - for example - clearly embarrassed when trying to explain the scene in which Vimalakīrti outsmarts even the great Maitreya, teacher of the gods and Buddha of the future; in this case he ends up with providing no less than three alternative explanations, only the third one alluding to the fact that this might be just a transformation body and not Maitreya itself (see 《注維摩詰經》卷4〈菩薩品4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 360, b29-c10)).

<sup>54</sup> On the figure of this bodhisattva see Lamotte 1960

<sup>55</sup> Hamlin 1988

acts as a religious interpreter, a sort of missing link who makes enlightenment comprehensible to those in the lower worlds”<sup>56</sup> and thus plays a pivotal religious role.

The whole narration is filled with the occurrence of supernatural events in which magic bursts into the scene. For example, at the beginning of the dharma-gathering Vimalakīrti borrows from the buddha Sumeru Lamp King thirty-two thousand lion seats of huge size and fits them into his room for his guests to sit without this causing any deformation of the city of Vaiśālī, neither of the Jambudvīpa, or all the worlds of four continents; or, again, in chapter X Vimalakīrti makes visible to the congregation an entirely different world system in which the reigning buddha Accumulation of Fragrances delivers his teachings by means of fragrance rather than words. All these events are not mere dramatic inventions; rather, they represent the actualization of the fundamental teaching of emptiness: being ultimately devoided of self-nature, all the elements of existence have no fixed size, length, weight or consistency whatsoever. Space and time are but conventional conceptions without any real counterpart; they belong to the realm of illusion and thus can be modified at will by the skilled bodhisattvas who “play” with them for the purpose of guiding and instructing the beings.

A fine humor pervades the whole plot, often springing out of some true coups de théâtre, like for example the sudden transformation of Buddha’s famous disciple Śāriputra into a woman. This overall playful narrative and anti-dogmatic approach clearly aims at blaming an attitude of stubborn clinging to conceptual categorizations and serves to reveal the inconsistency of human ordinary ways of thinking.

## 2. Philosophical orientation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

In terms of philosophical orientation, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is directly linked to the earliest known recensions of fundamental Mahāyāna sūtras - or sūtra collections - like the *Prajñāpāramitā*, the *Ratnakūṭa*, the *Avataṃsaka* and the *Mahāsaṃnipāta*, and is part of the same philosophical and mystical movement<sup>57</sup>. Seeing that the scripture discusses the main tenets of the Madhyamaka school focusing on such themes as universal emptiness, non-duality, conventional truth vs. ultimate reality etc. there are good reasons for considering it as Madhyamaka oriented, albeit it would be hard to state whether it was a source of inspiration for Nāgārjuna’s systematization or it represents instead a dramatized compendium of the Madhyamaka, this being due to the difficulty of stating the dates of Nāgārjuna (the actual founder of the Madhyamaka)<sup>58</sup>.

As a matter of fact, however, in a very different fashion than the Madhyamaka scholastic works, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* proceeds through a dramatized aphoristic expositions of the highest truths which seem to suddenly sparkle like spectacular fireworks, and there is very little attempt at systematizing or demonstrating them through the use of logical procedures or philosophical argumentation. The believer is simply expected to have faith in the truths presented and believe in the authenticity of those statements.

## 3. Reception of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in China and reasons of its popularity

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* does not seem to have ever been popular in India where, as far as we known, not a single commentary has been dedicated to it<sup>59</sup>. However, it enjoyed great popularity in China at least since the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, to the point of becoming - according to

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 114

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Lamotte 1987, p. 40 and p. 66

<sup>58</sup> As Fussman explains, “la date manifestement ancienne du Vkn et la netteté de ses affirmations l’ont souvent fait considérer comme une des sources du *madhyamaka* de Nāgārjuna. N’était cette question de date, qui est plus le problème de la date de Nāgārjuna que celui de la date du Vkn, on croirait plutôt le contraire: dans bien de cas le Vkn semble illustrer ou résumer Nāgārjuna. Mais la majeure partie des savants préfère considérer que c’est l’inverse: Nāgārjuna développe les thèses du Vkn” (Fussman 2009, p.643).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Silk 2014, p. 158 and McRae 2004 p. 60

Zürcher - one of the five Mahāyāna scriptures “which more than any other text were destined to exert a profound influence upon the development of early Chinese Buddhist thought”<sup>60</sup>.

Of the various Chinese translations of this scripture produced from the Eastern Han up the Tang<sup>61</sup> only three have survived, namely the *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經 [T 474] by Zhi Qian 支謙 (fl. 222 - 252 AD) produced during the Three Kingdoms Period (likely between 222 and 229), the *Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經 [T 475] by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (Later Qin) made in A.D. 406) and the *Shuo Wugoucheng jing* 說無垢稱經 [T 476] by Xuanzang (602 - 664) dating 650 AD. Among these three versions, the one made by Kumārajīva has been undoubtedly the most popular and widespread not only in China but also throughout East-Asia up to the present day.

Not only this scripture had a strong impact on Buddhist thought, it also deeply influenced philosophy, literature and the visual arts<sup>62</sup>, to the point that the figure of Vimalakīrti became part of the imaginary of the Chinese people, from the cultured *intelligentsia* down to the lower social strata (see for example the great number of Tang “transformation texts” - *bianwen* 變文 -, based on this character<sup>63</sup>).

A number of scholars have investigated the reasons for the great popularity of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in China<sup>64</sup>; these can be outlined as follows.

### 3.1 Its size and format

As a matter of fact, the majority of the Chinese Classics (e.g. the *Confucian Analects*, the *Laozi*, Sunzi’s *Art of War*) are very short in size and compact in their exposition, and since very early times this essential and laconic style was particularly praised by *literati*. Being so, there is little doubt that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was much more in tune with the Chinese literary conventions and taste than the often long-winded and repetitive *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. On this respect the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 relates an emblematic case: when in the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century the general Yin Hao 殷浩 (died 356), having been dismissed from his position in the army and banished to

<sup>60</sup> The other four scriptures are the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra*, *Lotus sūtra*, *Sukhāvātīvyūha* (cf. Zürcher 2007, p. 70)

<sup>61</sup> According to Kuiji 窺基 (632 - 682), during the four hundred years going from the Eastern Han to the Tang, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* has been given seven different Chinese translations, the earliest being made by Yan Fotiao 嚴佛調 (Eastern Han) and the last one by Xuanzang (Tang dynasty). Cf. Kuiji’s *Shuo Wugoucheng jing shu*: 說無垢稱經疏: “此經前後, 雖復七翻, 嚴佛調漢翻於白馬; 支恭明吳譯於武康; 法護、林 (var. 叔) 蘭、蜜多三士, 東西兩晉, 各傳本教; 羅什翻於秦朝; 和上暢於唐。” 《說無垢稱經疏》卷 1 〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1782, p. 1001, c21-24). The eminent Tang exegete has constructed this list by collecting practically all the Chinese versions of the scripture mentioned in various ancient catalogues, without actually indicating what his sources are and without questioning their reliability. For a careful critical discussion of each of the seven works mentioned (including references to ancient catalogues) see Lamotte 1987, pp. 2 - 14, Tu Yanqiu 2015 (a) and Yang Guigui 2013, pp. 22 - 41. As Nattier has observed, Sengyou considers Zhi Qian’s to be the first translation of the text; yet, - she notices - the fact that he lists it as “lost” has led to speculation that T474 might be Dharmarakṣa’s version. The scholar argues against these views and shows that there is strong internal evidence pointing in the direction of Zhi Qian’s authorship (Cf. Nattier 2008, p.140 - 141).

Besides the various Chinese translations of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, it deserves mention that in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century the monk Zhi Mindu 支愍度 (fl. ca. 290 - 326) had prepared a synoptic edition of the text, viz. the *He Weimojie jing* 合維摩詰經 in 5 fascicles. This work is now lost but from its preface preserved in *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145] p. 58, b21-c10) we learn that it was based on three versions, namely those by Zhi Qian, Dharmarakṣa and Zhu Shulan 竺叔蘭 (cf. 「于時 (=於漢) 有優婆塞支恭明, 逮及於晉有法護、叔蘭。」 《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 58, b25-26)). Cf. also the entry written by Sengyou in the same catalogue: 「合維摩詰經五卷 (合支謙、竺法護、竺叔蘭所出《維摩》。三本合為一部)」 《出三藏記集》卷 2 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 10, a11-12)). For a discussion of the pre-Kumārajīva versions of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* see Shi Guopu 1997.

<sup>62</sup> For a discussion of the influence of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* on Chinese literature and visual arts see Zürcher 2007, p. 132, Mather 1968 (particularly pp. 60 - 61) and Demieville 1987.

<sup>63</sup> On this important literary genre see Mair 1984 and 1989

<sup>64</sup> See for example Zürcher 2007 (pp. 131 - 132), Mather 1968 and Silk 2014

Xin'an 信安 in Dongyang 東陽, first undertook the study of the Buddhist sūtras he objected against the literary style of the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures holding that the larger version of it (*i.e.* Mokṣala's *Fangguang jing* 放光經) was too prolix and the lesser one (*i.e.* Lokakṣema's *Daoxing jing* 道行經) was too concise<sup>65</sup>; only the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (probably in Zhi Qian's early third century version [T 474]) met with his literary taste possessing the ideal size and "compactness".

Curiously enough, the same positive feature of this sūtra is evidenced by the Indian Kumārajīva in his commentary, where *inter alia* he too compares it to the prolix *Fangguang* 放光:

**什**曰。[...]放光等所明實相，廣散難尋。此經略敘眾經要義，明簡易了，故歎“未曾有！”也。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷10〈法供養品13〉(CBETA, T1775, p. 413, c29-p. 414, a2)

**K:** In their explanation of the True Characteristic 實相 (*i.e.* according to Kumārajīva, the fundamental teaching of Mahāyāna Buddhism) sūtras like the *Fangguang*<sup>66</sup> etc. are extensive and dispersed [to the point that their essential purport] is hard to find. [Instead,] this sūtra briefly exposes the essential meaning of all sūtras; it is clear, simple and easy to understand, hence [the god Indra] sighs that “this (*i.e.*, what he has heard from the Buddha) is marvelous”.

The translator's comment is echoed by Sengzhao in his own commentary:

**肇**曰。[...]此經言雖簡約而義包群典。坐不踰日而備觀通變、大乘微遠之言。神通感應之力，一時所遇，理無不盡。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷10〈法供養品13〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 414, a4-7)

**SZ:** [...] This sūtra is simple and concise in its expression, yet its meaning encompasses all [the other] scriptures. Sitting [and reading it] in a very short time, [the reader] can comprehensively observe the [numinous] penetrations and the ever changing [upāya]. The subtle far-reaching words of the Mahāyāna and the responsive force of the [bodhisattva's] supernatural powers are immediately presented and the Principle [of the doctrine] is fully clarified. [...]

The fact that this sūtra was more a compendium of the Mahāyāna philosophy than an original elaboration on a specific teaching or doctrine may well be one of the reasons why, albeit meeting the literary taste of Chinese *literati*, it never became the scriptural basis for any of the Sinitic Buddhist School flourished during the Sui and Tang dynasties<sup>67</sup>.

### 3.2 Its stylistic features

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* can be described as a “philosophical drama” or a “dramatized exposition of the Buddhist doctrine” in which poetics and philosophical content are intimately interwoven and equally important<sup>68</sup>. Its carefully constructed plotted story develops a main theme through a series of episodes while maintaining a constant dramatic tension and suspense.

Many of the stylistic features of this work were surprisingly in tune with the practice of *qingtān* 清談 (the “pure conversations”, *i.e.* rhetorical contests on more or less philosophical topics) which was extremely popular among the members of the northern gentry families who had re-settled in the Yangtze delta during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The first common element was the emphasis on dialogue: in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* the Buddhist doctrines are discussed and exposed through a dialogue between different characters, just as in the “pure conversations” the different players involved - usually two - tried to

<sup>65</sup> See *Shishuo xinyu*, *Wenxue* 50 (cf. Yu Jiaxi 1993, pp. 204 - 205)

<sup>66</sup> *Fangguang jing* 放光經 is a late third century Chinese version of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* produced by the Khotanese Mokṣala 無叉羅 and the sinicized Indian upāsaka Zhu Shulan.

<sup>67</sup> See on this Zürcher 2007, p. 131

<sup>68</sup> Hamlin comments that “the plot line is far more than just an armature for a scholastic discourse; it both vivifies and takes its direction from the issues being debated by Vimalakīrti and his guests” (Hamlin 1988, p. 89)

overcome each other by elaborating more and more sophisticated and trenchant formulations of their views on the debated topic.

Another important converging feature was the frequent use of humor and wit: as pointed out above, humor is a characterizing element of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, and it was at the same time a highly valued and appreciated “ingredient” in the *qingtān* rhetorical meetings, to the point that a cogent witty remark could often represent a decisive move leading to the opponent’s defeat (numerous examples of this phenomenon are recorded in *Shishuo Xinyu*).

A third common element was the general conception of language and its particular use in the debate practice: in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as much as in the *qingtān* “confrontations” language was considered but as an imperfect and defective means to point to “the ultimate”, a metaphysical truth which was ultimately unspeakable. For this reason, in both cases the dialogues were characterized by the frequent use of allusions and paradoxical and enigmatic statements.

We can easily imagine how in the eyes of the cultured Chinese of that age, the three features described above drew the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* very near to the *Zhuangzi*, a text which starting from the Western Jin (265 - 317) knew a growing popularity among the Southern aristocracy<sup>69</sup>: besides providing innumerable themes for the *qingtān* discussions, it also deeply influenced the understanding of the relation between language and the ultimate<sup>70</sup>.

### 3.3 The appeal of Vimalakīrti’s figure

Vimalakīrti’s figure had a great appeal for the Chinese learned upper-class for many reasons. To begin with, being described as a householder who could at the same time be involved in all kinds of wordly affairs and follow the spiritual path of self-cultivation maintaining himself in seclusion, silence and purity became a reference-model for many gentry officials of the Southern aristocracy who wanted to reject all commitments to public life but were still racked by the dilemma between activism and quietism (a much-debated topic in the Xuanxue 玄學 philosophical discourse since its beginning in the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century). Following Vimalakīrti’s example, the choice of hermitage could be interpreted as “a state of mind cultivable in the hurly-burly of office”<sup>71</sup>.

Moreover, having Vimalakīrti as its hero, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* seemed to attribute a very high status to the lay practitioners, suggesting that they could surpass in wisdom the gods, ordained monks and even the Buddha’s disciples (this notwithstanding, the sūtra explicitly considers entering the monastic order as the main pathway for achieving the highest goal of spiritual life, i.e. *anuttarā samyaksaṃbodhi* - complete, perfect enlightenment -).

A third appealing element in Vimalakīrti’s figure was his liberal attitude towards the drastically unfilial act of leaving home to become a monk. In fact, as we read in chapter 3, while Buddha’s son Rāhula is explaining to the elders’ sons of Vaiśālī the benefits and merits of leaving home, Vimalakīrti addresses him pointing out that “leaving home is an unconditioned dharma and there are no benefits and merits in unconditioned dharmas”; when the elders’ sons

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<sup>69</sup> One of the main reasons for the growing popularity of this text was the composition of two highly influential commentaries on it by Xiang Xiu 向秀 (227 - 272) and Guo Xiang 郭象 (252 - 312).

<sup>70</sup> The choral or multi-voiced exposition and the humoristic approach have been aptly described by the translator Burton Watson as the two main characterizing features of the *Zhuangzi*. As he states, “most early Chinese philosophical works are marked by a single and fairly consistent voice that runs throughout the book [...], with the *Chuang-tzu* the case is quite different [since its author] speaks with a babble of voices. With him the anecdote is no longer an appendage to the argument but the argument itself. One historical or pseudo-historical figure, one talking creature after another appears on the scene, each representing a different personality and outlook, and as a result the tone of the discourse keeps shifting constantly”. Watson has also evidenced “the incomparable wit and humor that lie at the very heart of the *Chuang-tzu*”, pointing out that “humor is on the whole a rare element in most Chinese philosophical writing. In the *Chuang-tzu*, on the contrary, it is the single most potent device employed by the writer to jar the reader out of his mundane complacencies and waken him to the possibility of another realm of experience” (Mair 1983, pp. X - XI)

<sup>71</sup> Mather 1968, p. 67



remind him that Buddha considered that one may not leave home without first receiving permission from his parents, Vimalakīrti replies by saying: “You should immediately generate the intention to achieve anuttarā samyaksaṃbodhi, and this is to “leave home.” This is sufficient.’

A last appealing element was Vimalakīrti’s “skill in means” which allowed him to spread the Dharma adapting to the specific features of all beings and to the different situations he found himself in. This way of dealing with the world no doubt represented a reference-model to the Chinese *literati* who were in those times deeply involved in the discussion on the characteristics of the Sage, his ways of responding to the different *stimuli* of the outside world, his having or not emotions etc.

### 3.4 The reconciliation of differences

In chapter 1 of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Baoji 寶積 praises the Buddha with a laudatory hymn where we find the following two verses:

佛以一音演說法， 眾生隨類各得解， [...]

佛以一音演說法， 眾生各各隨所解」《維摩詰所說經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 538, a2-5)

The Buddha explains the Dharma with one sound, and sentient beings each attain understanding according to their capacity. [...]

The Buddha preaches the Dharma with one sound, and sentient beings each understand accordingly.

As Mather has shown, this passage was very often quoted in later literary works giving the feeling that the Chinese found appealing “the universality and flexibility of the sūtra’s outlook. There was no imposition of conformity to an alien mode of thought”. The “one sound” of the Buddha became “a universally recognized symbol for the reconciliation of all differences, but especially those between Buddhism and Chinese tradition”<sup>72</sup>.

## 4. A brief overview of the Chinese exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

The Chinese exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* - an exercise which along the ages led to the production of a very consistent amount of works<sup>73</sup> presenting different features, formats and approaches - must have started quite early since we possess fragments of commentaries based upon Zhi Qian’s version of the text<sup>74</sup>.

Kumārajīva’s new version produced in 406 immediately became the standard version adopted by the large majority of the commentators during the subsequent ages. The *Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經 which is studied in this work, includes the first three Chinese commentaries based on it.

It was no doubt under the Sui (581 - 618) that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* received the greatest exegetical attention. In fact, in those years Huiyuan 慧遠 of the Jingying Monastery 淨影寺 (523 - 592) composed his *Weimo jing yiji* 維摩經義記 [T1776], Zhiyi 智顗 (538 - 597) wrote no less

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<sup>72</sup> Mather 1968, pp. 66 - 67

<sup>73</sup> From the Later Qin to the Tang period we count at least 22 commentaries. For an overview of this topic see Wang Xinhui 2006, pp. 5 - 7.

<sup>74</sup> For the textual history, transmission and exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in China prior to Kumārajīva see Shi Guopu 1998 (particularly pp. 15 - 31; see also the useful synoptic table at p. 52 presenting the materials related to the sūtra text and its exegesis along the Wei-jin period - including those preserved in the Canon and those not yet included in it from Dunhuang and Turfan -). Shi Guopu also undertakes an in-depth study of the important fragment P3006 (part of an inter-linear commentary based on Zhi Qian’s version written between 359 and 406 AD) which probably represents the earliest surviving evidence of the exegesis of this scripture.

than four commentaries on it<sup>75</sup> and Jizang 吉藏 (549 - 623) authored the *Jingming xuanlun* 淨名玄論 [T1780], the *Weimojing yishu* 維摩經義疏 [T1781] and the *Weimojing lüeshu* 維摩經略疏 [X 343].

Zhiyi's exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* ideally continued through the Tang, since in that age his disciple Zhanran 湛然 (711 - 782) rearranged the master's imposing *Weimo jing wenshu* 維摩經文疏 (in 28 fascicles) into the shorter *Weimo jing lüeshu* 維摩經略疏 [T1778] (*Concise annotations on the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*) in 10 fascicles; this work was in turn commented upon during the Song by Zhiyuan 智圓 (976 - 1022) who composed the *Weimojing lüeshu chuiyu ji* 維摩經略疏垂裕記 [T1779].

Under the Tang new commentaries were also produced, like Daoye's 道液 (mid-Tang dynasty) *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 [T2777] - completed in 760, then further revised and published in its final edition in 765 - and *Jingming jing Guanzhong shichao* 淨名經關中釋抄 [T 2778] (both texts have been discovered in Dunhuang).

A century before - in 650 -, the monk Xuanzang (602 - 664) had retranslated the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (*Shuo Wugoucheng jing* 說無垢稱經 [T 476]) and his disciple Kuiji's 窺基 (632 - 682) had composed on this new - but little influential - version a commentary entitled *Shuo Wugoucheng jing shu* 說無垢稱經疏 [T1782].

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<sup>75</sup> According to the Japanese scholar Satō Tetsuei, Zhiyi submitted his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentaries* to Yang Guang 楊廣 in three distinct occasions: **1.** During the 6<sup>th</sup>~7<sup>th</sup> month of the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the Kaihuang era 開皇 (595) the monk submitted a *Xuanyi* (*Profound Meaning [Interpretation]*) 玄義 in 10 fascicles. Under the Tang this work was divided into *Sixi Tanyi* 四悉檀義 (now lost), *Sanguan yi* 三觀義 and *Sijiao yi* 四教義 (both preserved) (cf. 《法華文句記》卷1〈釋序品〉 (CBETA, T34, no. 1719, p. 159, b13-16); **2.** During the 3<sup>rd</sup>~4<sup>th</sup> month of the 17<sup>th</sup> year of the Kaihuang era 開皇 (597) he submitted a *Xuanshu* (*Profound Commentary*) 玄疏 in 6 fascicles and a *Wenshu* (*Textual Explanation*) 文疏 in 8 fascicles. Since Zhiyi was not fully satisfied with these two works, they got destroyed after a new version of them was produced; **3.** In a third occasion he submitted a revised version of the *Xuanshu* in 6 fascicles and of the *Wenshu* in 25 fascicles. The last part of this last work was completed by the disciple Guanding 灌頂 upon Zhiyi's death, thus reaching the number of 28 fascicles. These two works are still preserved (see Satō Tetsuei 1961, pp. 420 - 428 and Guo Zhaoshun 2017, p. 47).

## CHAPTER ONE

### A Genealogy of Buddhist Translation Activity in Chang'an and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* [T1775] as a Product of Kumārajīva's Translation Enterprise

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* [T1775] is a typical product of the large scale Buddhist translation enterprise directed by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 that was set up in Chang'an 長安 at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. This text is the result of specific translation procedures, work organization, exegetical strategies and modes of state patronage and sponsorship which slowly developed in the two centuries preceding the arrival of the Kuchean master to the Later Qin 後秦 capital city, hence it would hardly be possible to understand and fully appreciate its formal features, its nature and significance without clarifying this historical evolution.

In this chapter I will thus trace a genealogy of the translation activity in Chang'an describing the evolution of its approaches as well as the more general awareness they presuppose, also by referring to the important connections between the Buddhist *milieu* and the Chinese mainstream intellectual history. Three main historical figures will be considered: Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 (active ca. 266 - 308) who made Chang'an into a major Buddhist center and laid the foundations for the translation activity in the city, Dao'an 道安 (312 - 385) who developed a new critical approach to Buddhist texts and derived from it a series of procedures aiming at improving the quality of the translation output, and finally Kumārajīva (344 - 413) who further developed the know-how inherited from his predecessors and perfected it.

In the light of the historical data and the elements of intellectual history provided I will eventually discuss some important features of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* related to the Buddhist translation activity.

#### 1. The foundations: Dharmarakṣa's<sup>76</sup> activity in Chang'an<sup>77</sup>

In the period between the Eastern Han 東漢 (25 - 220 AD) and the Wei 魏 (220 - 265 AD) the main Buddhist translation center in China had been Luoyang 洛陽. However, its importance was overshadowed by Chang'an 長安 during the Western Jin 西晉 (265 - 316), when the polyglot Yuezhi 月支<sup>78</sup> missionary Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu 竺法護, active ca. 266 - 308) moved there from Dunhuang<sup>79</sup> around 265 AD and started an intense missionary activity that greatly fostered the development of the local Buddhist community which included both members of the gentry (*shi* 士) and common people (*shu* 庶). He is said to have founded a monastery out of the Qing Gate (*Qing men* 青門) and to have practiced the Buddhist Path with such dedication that his moralizing influence extended far away. His fame spread in the surrounding areas and despite

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<sup>76</sup> On the life and activity of Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 see Zürcher 2007, pp. 65 - 70, Ren Jiyu 1985, pp. 23 - 109, Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, pp. 118 - 123 and Boucher 2006. The most detailed study on this topic is Boucher 1996.

<sup>77</sup> Dharmarakṣa did not reside in Chang'an continuously. On the basis of the dates and location of his translations Boucher argues that his most productive periods in the city were the years 266 - 273 and 284 - 286 (see Boucher 2006, pp. 26 - 30).

<sup>78</sup> Most scholars identify "Yuezhi" with the realm of the Kushans, who then controlled northwest India and adjoining regions; however, there are also other possible interpretations for this term (cf. on this Nattier 2008, p. 73 n. 164).

<sup>79</sup> The *Gaoseng zhuan* explains that "[Fa]hu's [family] had resided in Dunhuang for generations; [since Fahu's] proselytizing activity had widely spread, his contemporaries called him 'the bodhisattva from Dunhuang'" 「護世居燉煌，而化道周給 (read with variant 洽)，時人咸謂「燉煌菩薩」也。」《高僧傳》卷1 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 327, a11-12). The sobriquet "bodhisattva from Dunhuang" (*Dunhuang pusa* 敦煌菩薩 or *Dunhuang kaishi* 燉煌闍士) has been used since very early times; see for example *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145] vol. 7, p. 50, c27-28; vol. 8, p. 57, c20-21; vol. 9, p. 63, b14.

the endless wars and disorders that were raging across northern China, thousands of disciples reached the capital to venerate him as their master<sup>80</sup>.

Moreover, having carried with himself from the Western Lands a large quantity of Buddhist texts<sup>81</sup> he started a translation activity which would make him the most prolific translator of his time and the greatest before Kumārajīva.<sup>82</sup> He made for the first time available to the Chinese public or re-translated a number of fundamental Mahāyāna sūtras<sup>83</sup> which were to meet with enormous popularity<sup>84</sup>. In assessing his activity Zürcher states that:

it is undoubtedly true that it was he (i.e. Dharmarakṣa) who made from the hitherto rather insignificant Buddhist community at Chang'an the major Buddhist center in Northern China, thus laying the foundations of the work which, some seventy years after his death, would be resumed by Dao'an and completed by Kumārajīva and his school.<sup>85</sup>

As to the translation activity, by Dharmarakṣa's times this had already assumed the form of a collective enterprise articulated in a three-fold process<sup>86</sup> which was to remain essentially unchanged till the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century:

1. the main "translator" (*yiren* 譯人)<sup>87</sup> (usually a foreign monk who was little or not at all proficient in Chinese) holding the foreign scripture in his hands (*zhi huben* 執胡本) orally "issued" (*chu* 出)<sup>88</sup> the text in the original language (which could have been Sanskrit or any other Central Asian language);
2. a "bilingual interpreter" (*duyu* 度語, *chuanyu zhe* 傳語者, or *chuan suyu zhe* 傳俗語者) - often a monk from the bordering regions of Western China - orally translated in Chinese the words of the foreign master (*zhuan hu wei Han/Qin/Jin* 轉胡為漢/秦/晉);
3. a scribe - generally an elder educated and experienced Chinese monk - "took down with the brush" (*bishou* 筆受) the oral translation usually rephrasing it into a refined literary style. The written text was then subjected to corrections (*zhengyi* 正義) and revisions (*canjiao* 參校) before being finally "established" (*ding* 定).

<sup>80</sup> See *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 13, p. 98, a8-10

<sup>81</sup> See *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 13, p. 97, c20-29: "Then carrying a large quantity of foreign scriptures he returned to China. From Dunhuang he went to Chang'an" 「遂大齋胡本，還歸中夏。自燉煌至長安。」

<sup>82</sup> During his activity in Chang'an, from 266 to 308 Dharmarakṣa is credited with having translated more than 150 texts for a total amount of approximately 300 scrolls (see Wang Tiejun 2006, p. 59).

<sup>83</sup> As Dharmarakṣa's biography in *Chu sanzang jiji* informs us, "These were the times when emperor Wu of the Jin dynasty was in power (236 - 290). Even though monasteries, temples, stūpas and statues were built in the capital [Luoyang], the deep *Vaipulya sūtras* were still hidden in the Western Regions. Then Dharmarakṣa resolutely decided to undertake the task [of translating them], wanting to spread the Great Doctrine [to China]" 「是時晉武帝之世。寺、廟、圖、像雖崇京邑而方等深經蘊在西域。護乃慨然發憤，志弘大道」《出三藏記集》卷 13 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 97, c24-26)

<sup>84</sup> For example he produced the first translation of the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* (*Guangzan jing* 光贊經) and of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Zheng fahua jing* 正法華經 [T263]), and retranslated the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*.

<sup>85</sup> Zürcher 2007, p. 66

<sup>86</sup> Boucher remarks that "this general [three-fold] process was followed to a large degree from the very beginning of Buddhist translation production in China" (Boucher 1996, p. 63) and quotes a colophon to Lokakṣema's (active 168 - 188) translation of the *Pratiutpannasamādhisūtra* to prove such statement.

<sup>87</sup> It must be noted that there is a certain ambiguity in the use of the word *yiren* 譯人 in the sources. Even though most of the times it refers to the "main translator" (which was the depositary of the text and the person who could explain its meaning), sometimes it also indicates the "bilingual translator" who actually made the translation. In modern Chinese scholarship on Buddhist translation in ancient times the "main translator" is called *zhuyi* 主譯, a modern word that is actually never found in the early sources.

<sup>88</sup> On the meaning of the term *chu* 出 in the sources on Buddhist translation and its nuances see Boucher 1996, pp. 89 - 93 and Zacchetti 2005, p. 52, n. 10.

Dharmarakṣa's translations generally followed this *modus operandi*<sup>89</sup> with the only peculiarity that, the Yuezhi translator sometimes “held the foreign text in his hands and orally expounded it in Chinese [on his own]”<sup>90</sup> playing at the same time the role of “main translator” and “bilingual interpreter”. He is actually the first translator to have been explicitly reported in *Chu sanzang jiji* as having done so<sup>91</sup>.

From the linguistic point of view, Dharmarakṣa's legacy was also very consistent; in fact, he and his collaborators elaborated a Buddhist scriptural style that was to be widely employed and perfected by his successors. As Zürcher remarks:

It is clear that in the early fifth century Kumārajīva and his translation team have made an essential contribution by creating a standardized scriptural style that was to remain exemplary for several centuries. But they built upon the basis laid by the translators of the late third and fourth centuries, notably on the translation idioms developed by Dharmarakṣa and his school [...]<sup>92</sup>

Not much is known about the financial support that sustained Dharmarakṣa's activity but it appears that the translation work at his time was still a matter of private enterprise, being financed by the many lay followers and interested people that surrounded him. On this regard, some twenty names of donors (*quanzhu zhe* 勸助者) are mentioned in the sources.<sup>93</sup>

According to his biography, Dharmarakṣa left Chang'an with his disciples around the year 304 when the Disorders of the Eight Princes 八王之亂 (291 - 306)<sup>94</sup> had thrown the city into chaos and headed east. He did not come farther than Mian Chi 澠池 near Luoyang; there he fell ill and died at the age of 78.

## 2. Later developments: Dao'an's translation activity in Chang'an (379 - 385)

In the Spring of the year 378 AD the king of the Former Qin 前秦 Fu Jian 苻堅 conquered the city of Xiangyang 襄陽 and when back to court wrote a letter to Zhu Zhen 諸鎮 in which he sarcastically said: “When in the past the Jin submitted the Wu kingdom, their [major] gain was

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<sup>89</sup> A detailed discussion of the *modus operandi* followed by Dharmarakṣa and his collaborators (whose general features are outlined here) can be found in Boucher 1996, in particular pp. 62 - 102.

<sup>90</sup> See for example *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 7, p. 48, b29-28: “The śramaṇa Dharmarakṣa in the Temple of the Divine Water held the foreign text in his hands and orally expounded it in Chinese. At that time the scribes were the śramaṇas Kang Shu and Mian Faju” 沙門法護在天水寺手執胡本，口宣晉言。時筆受者，沙門康殊、帛法巨。] As Boucher suggested, Dharmarakṣa probably developed his Chinese skills in the period 273 - 284; as to this “exposition in Chinese”, the scholar says “we can assume that Dharmarakṣa himself controls the recitation of the Indic text and makes a version of its exegesis in Chinese available to one or more assistants” (Boucher 1996, p. 94).

<sup>91</sup> Even so, it is very likely that earlier on also An Shigao (active in China from 148 AD) and Zhi Qian (active 222-254) personally issued the text and translated it into Chinese (see Zacchetti 1996, p. 345).

<sup>92</sup> In his «New Preface to the *Buddhist Conquest of China*» (written in 1993 and available in Zürcher 2013, pp. 447 - 455) Zürcher had observed that the translation idioms developed by Dharmarakṣa and his school constituted “a subject that still has to be investigated”. However, in later years this has indeed been studied in depth by Daniel Boucher (see Boucher 1996, in particular pp. 170 - 249); moreover, a detailed study of Dharmarakṣa's *Guangzan jing* 光讚經 - including its linguistic features - has been undertaken by Zacchetti (see Zacchetti 2005).

<sup>93</sup> See Zürcher 2007, p. 68 and Wang Tiejun 2006, p. 60.

<sup>94</sup> This was a ferocious fight for power between members of the Jin ruling family (the Sima 司馬 clan) and between the family itself and the powerful rival Jia 賈 family. The disorders brought into play the nomadic tribes who had settled within the Chinese borders since the Eastern Han and now made alliances with the Chinese princes. The disorders ended up with the collapse of the Western Jin, the southward flight of the court, and the rule of barbaric tribes over Northern China. The division between North and South was to last for centuries until the re-unification of the empire under the Sui in 589. On these important events, which re-shaped the political geography of China and strongly influenced the spread and development of Buddhism see Graff 2002, pp. 44 - 47, de Crespigny 2003, and Declerque 1998, p. 51.

the capture of the two Lu (*i.e.*, Lu Ji 陸機 and Lu Yun 陸雲, two brothers who were widely renowned for their literary talent). Now that I have conquered the Hannan region 漢南, I got [instead only] one man and a half”.<sup>95</sup> The “half man” was the gifted *literatus* and state official Xi Zuochi 習鑿齒 (died ca. 383) who was disabled and walked with a limp, the “one man” was the great Buddhist master Dao’an. Due to his poor health, the former obtained to go back to Xiangyang, whereas the latter settled down in the capital city Chang’an 長安<sup>96</sup> and resumed the missionary activity started by Dharmarakṣa some 70 years after his death contributing more than anyone else to the growth of Buddhism not only in Chang’an but in the whole empire<sup>97</sup>.

## 2.1 The arising of a new awareness: from *geyi* 格義 to textual study

By the time he moved to Chang’an Dao’an was already deeply aware of the pitfalls and shortcomings of the earlier exegetical techniques aiming at making sense of the often obscure and even abstruse Buddhist texts in Chinese translation such as the “matching concepts” (*geyi* 格義). This expedient consisted in “correlating the enumerations of items (*shishu* 事數)<sup>98</sup> in the sūtras with [comparable lists of notions found in] non-Buddhist writings for the purpose of generating understanding”<sup>99</sup>. Dao’an had learned this approach from Zhu Faya 竺法雅 (1<sup>st</sup> half 4<sup>th</sup> cent.)<sup>100</sup> between 335 and 348<sup>101</sup> while residing in Ye 鄴 (near Linzhang 臨漳, in Southern

<sup>95</sup> 昔晉氏平吳，利在二陸。今破漢南，獲士裁一人有半耳 (Xi Zuochi’s biography 習鑿齒傳, in *Jin Shu* 晉書 vol. 82). This fact is differently reported in Dao’an’s biography in *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059]: “[Dao]an and [the Jin commander and governor of the Jin 晉 fortress of Xiang Yang 襄陽] Zhu Xu were both captured by [Fu] Jian. [Fu] Jian said to the vice director of the Department of State Affairs Quan Yi: ‘I took [the city of] Xiangyang employing a hundred thousand divisions and I only obtained a man and a half. [Quan] Yi asked: ‘Whom?’ Jian replied ‘The one man is Dao’an, while Xi Zuochi is the half man’” 「安與朱序俱獲於堅。堅謂僕射權翼曰：“朕以十萬之師取襄陽，唯得一人半。”翼曰：“誰耶？”堅曰：“安公一人，習鑿齒半人也。”」 (vol. 5, p. 352, c25-28)

<sup>96</sup> The best account of Dao’an and his equipe’s translation activity in Chang’an is found in Palumbo’s study on the translation of the *Ekottarikāgama* 增一阿含經 and its commentary, the *Fenbie gongde lun* 分別功德論 (Palumbo, 2013). See also Ren Jiyu 1985, p. 181 and Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 167. For a historical study on Fu Jian and his rule see Rogers 1968.

<sup>97</sup> This new phase is described by Zürcher as follows: “[...] a new chapter in the history of Northern Buddhism [...] characterized by a renewed influx of missionaries, scriptures and ideas from Central Asia and India, huge translation projects, state patronage and supervision, and the emergence of a body of scriptural and scholastic literature (Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna) together with a new method of exegesis and a new translation technique” (Zürcher 2007, p. 114)

<sup>98</sup> The term *shishu* 事數 is used in *Shishuo xinyu*, *Wenxue* 59 (cf. Yu Jiaxi 1993, p. 210) and clearly explained in Liu Xiaobia’s 劉孝標 (463 - 521) *Commentary* (cf. Zhu Bilian 2013, vol. 1, p. 152): it indicates the numerical categories ubiquitous in the Indian Buddhist texts which were so hard to grasp for the Chinese public, such as for instance the Five Personality components (*pañcaskandha*) 五蘊, the Twelve Entrances (*dvādaśāyatanāni*) 十二入, the Four Truths (*catvāri ārya-satyāni*) 四聖諦, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination (*dvādaśaṅga pratyāyasamutpāda*) 十二因緣, the Five Sense-organs (*pañcendriyāni*) 五根 etc. In an important article (Mair 2010) Victor Mair has collected, analysed and commented all the early sources on the *geyi* practice and has pointed out that: **1.** the “*geyi* practice lasted for no more than a generation and it was restricted to a very small group of persons who experimented with it unsuccessfully for a limited, specific purpose, *i.e.* to lessen the burden of Chinese Buddhists when dealing with numerical lists of concepts and terms”; **2.** this practice was intended as a hermeneutical expedient and had nothing to do with translation; **3.** “the overwhelming majority of the modern translations and interpretations of *geyi* are partially or totally false”; in particular, the term “*geyi* Buddhism” (*geyi* Fojiao 格義佛教) used in Japanese and Chinese, but also Western Buddhist scholarship (often indicating the generic reliance on conceptions found in Chinese traditional texts - in particular the *Laozi* 老子, the *Yijing* 易經, and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 - for matching and explaining Indian Buddhist ideas) is but a “reification of a hypothetical construct that never existed in historical reality, but one that—once born—takes on a life of its own and becomes a cornerstone in studies of the history and thought of Chinese Buddhism”.

<sup>99</sup> 「以經中事數擬配外書，為生解之例，謂之“格義”。」 (Faya’s biography 法雅傳, in *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 4, p. 347, a20-22)

<sup>100</sup> Faya belonged to a gentry family. As a youth he excelled in secular learning, and as he grew up he became well versed in the Buddhist doctrine. Apparently one of Fotucheng’s most trusted disciples, he alternately lectured on secular works and Buddhist sūtras (cf. Zürcher 2007, pp. 8 and 181).

Hebei) and studying under the (probably Kuchean) master Fotucheng 佛圖澄; apparently, he had used it not only as a tool for teaching neophytes but also as a hermeneutical device for figuring out the meaning of the scriptures.

It was most likely after fleeing to Huoze 獲澤 (West of Yangcheng 陽城 Xian, Shanxi) - around 350 AD - that Dao'an, thanks to the influence of learned monks like Zhu Faji 竺法濟, Zhi Tanjiang 支曇講 and Zhu Sengfu 竺僧輔<sup>102</sup>, began to question the *geyi* approach and tried instead to make sense of the difficult passages in the Buddhist scriptures by focusing on textual analysis, a practice that made him discover in the sūtras many mistakes and inconsistencies such as, for example, the reversed order of many sentences (*judaο* 句倒), missing words (*tuozì* 脫字), mistaken characters (*cuozì* 錯字), mistaken sequence of terms (*shì cì* 失次), missing parts (*jīngwén yīshì* 經文佚失) etc. In his commentaries (as Tang Yongtong recognizes, Dao'an is the first important author of commentaries on Buddhist texts<sup>103</sup>), besides pointing out these problems, he also used glosses for explaining the meaning of certain characters in the specific context in which they were found, he exposed the essential meaning of particularly difficult passages, and clarified the structure of the whole scripture by dividing it into a certain number of sections dealing with specific topics (thus applying for the first time the *kepan* 科判 parceling method that would become so important in later Buddhist exegesis)<sup>104</sup>.

While residing on the Feilong Mountain 飛龍山 (nearby Huoze), the monk clearly expressed the new awareness which was at the basis of his approach to the scriptures and which would later have a great impact on his organization of the translation work. Sengguang's 僧光 biography in *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 [T2059] reports the following exchange:

「[僧光] 值石氏之亂，隱於飛龍山。遊想巖壑，得志禪慧。道安後復從之，相會欣喜。謂」：「昔誓始從」。因共披文屬思，新悟尤多。安曰：「先舊格義，於理多違」先 (read with variant 光) 曰：「且當分折逍遙，何容是非先達？」安曰：「弘贊理教，宜令允愜。法鼓競鳴，何先何後？」《高僧傳》卷 5 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 355, a22-27)

When [Sengguang] met with the troubles of the Shi clan he secluded himself on the Flying Dragon Mountain (which is situated in today's Hebei 河北 Province, Zhuolu County 涿鹿縣)<sup>105</sup>. He made his thought roam the peaks and the gorges, and found pleasure in the wisdom of Dhyāna. Dao'an afterwards followed him there; on meeting each other they were delighted and rejoiced, saying: "Our old vow now begins to be realized!" Hence they together read the scriptures and pondered over [their meaning, in such a way that] their new

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<sup>101</sup> According to Tu Yanqiu, this is the time span within which Dao'an together with Fatai 法汰 would have been instructed by Faya 法雅 (cf. Tu Yanqiu 2010, p. 131)

<sup>102</sup> The meeting with these monks is mentioned by Dao'an in two prefaces to his commentary on the scriptures *Yinchuru jing* 陰持入經 (see *Chu sanzang jiji* T2145, vol. 6, p. 45, a8-10) and *Daodi jing* 道地經 (see *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 10, p. 69, c7-12). From these passages one can infer the influence they had on his new commentarial approach to the scriptures.

<sup>103</sup> See Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 414: "道安以前，雖有注經。然注疏創始，用功最勤，影響甚大者，仍推晉之道安。《高僧傳》曰：「條貫既序，文理會通。經義克明，自安始也」。安公而後，注疏溢多。遂為中土佛教典籍之要項矣". A good overview on Dao'an's commentarial style and approach is provided in Tu Yanqiu 2015 (b); on this aspect see also Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, pp. 158 - 161.

<sup>104</sup> The application of this exegetical method can be seen in Dao'an's only surviving commentary, i.e. the *Commentary on the Renbenyusheng jing* 人本欲生經註 [T1693] (for a detailed study see Tu Yanqiu 2010, in particular pp. 144 - 159). Zürcher remarks that: "If we may trust Dao'an's biographies, he was the first to give a detailed and careful exegesis of the Buddhist scriptures sentence by sentence, instead of limiting himself to a summary explanation of the general contents and to a mere recital of the text, as it was generally done at his time. [...] An orderly explanation of an early Buddhist text, each paragraph being duly defined and separated from the next by short explanatory and philological glosses seems to have been a novum at the time of Dao'an." (Zürcher 2007, p. 187)

<sup>105</sup> This must have happened somewhere between 349 and 356 (cf. Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 147), that is to say between his being 37 and 42 years old; Victor Mair says around 349 (cf. Mair 2010, p. 236)

insight became ever greater. [Dao'an] said: "The old *geyi* [technique] was utterly in contradiction to the [Buddhist] principles [expounded in the scriptures]". [Seng]guang replied: 'We should parse and analyze [the texts] with ease; how are we permitted to dispute the former sages?' [Dao'an] said: "In spreading the doctrine we should make it satisfactory to reason. In the competition of the Dharma Drums to resound, who gets first and who follows after?"

In the above passage the character *xian* 先 ("first") in the last sentence recalls the above mentioned *xianda* 先達 ("former sages"), an allusion to the fact that, according to Dao'an, in debating the meaning of the scriptures there should be no hierarchical distinction between the former masters and the later exegetes (*xian* 先 - *hou* 後)<sup>106</sup>. In other words, in explaining the meaning of the sūtras the principle of "plausibility" (*yunqie* 允愜) should be adopted, not the principle of authority, which could lead to the acritical acceptance of the former masters' views. Considering the traditional reverential attitude of the Chinese *literati* towards the former sages and the sacred texts which collected their words, Dao'an's stand is unusually daring and highly significant, and Tu Yanqiu is right in describing his words as "shaking heaven and earth"<sup>107</sup>, meaning that they were bold and ground-breaking for his time.

During his subsequent long residence in the city of Xiangyang 襄陽 (365 - 379)<sup>108</sup> the great master had applied this critical spirit to the study of the Prajñāpāramitā texts: he collected as many scriptures were available and extensively studied and compared them trying to make sense of their many obscure passages and writing explanatory commentaries. He also composed the first known catalogue of Buddhist scriptures *Zongli zhongjing mulu* 總理綜理眾經目錄 (374 AD)), in which he provided important data on the authorship, provenance and history of many texts and carefully discussed the attribution of others<sup>109</sup>.

No doubt, this intensive philological and bibliographical activity drove Dao'an to further remove Buddhist texts from the sacred sphere of the "former sages" and return them back to history: they were historical products whose accuracy and reliability rested upon the specific circumstances of their composition.

Much in tune with this realization is the fact that - as we know from the sources - Dao'an was constantly haunted by doubts about the correctness of his interpretation of the scriptures and maintained a fundamentally skeptical attitude on the possibility of grasping their true message. A famous passage in his biography relates in fact that:

「安常注諸經恐不合理。乃誓曰：“若所說不堪 (read with variant 甚) 遠理，願見瑞相”。乃夢見胡道人頭白眉毛長。語安云：“君所注經殊<sup>110</sup>合道理。我不得入泥洹，住在西域。當相助<sup>111</sup>弘通，可時時<sup>112</sup>設食”。」《高僧傳》卷 5 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 353, b17-21)

<sup>106</sup> As far as I could ascertain, this interpretation of the passage (which seems to me quite consistent with the context and convincing) has not been put forward before.

<sup>107</sup> 驚天動地 (Tu Yanqiu 2010, p. 139)

<sup>108</sup> On this period of Dao'an's life see Tang Yongtong 2000, vol.1, pp. 156 - 167 and Zürcher 2007, pp. 184 - 198

<sup>109</sup> This catalogue, which set an example to the Buddhist bibliographers of later times, is now lost. However, since it was virtually incorporated into *Chu sanzang jiji* (Sengyou usually specifies which works were mentioned by Dao'an) we are fairly well informed about its content and organization (cf. Zürcher 2007, p. 30 - 31).

<sup>110</sup> 殊、殊總：〔副〕(1) 用在動詞或形容詞前，表程度之甚，可譯作“特別”、“極”、“非常” (Dong Zhiqiao and Cai Jinghao 1994)

<sup>111</sup> Here I understand 相 as a prefix of 助 substituting the direct object "you"; on this usage cf. 早在先秦文獻中“相”字就有用在及物動詞前，表偏指的用法。“相”可偏指動詞後的第一、第二或第三人稱賓語。“動詞之前有偏指之相則賓語隱而不顯。”對此，呂叔湘先生《相字偏指釋例》（見《漢語語法論文集》）言之甚詳 (Dong Zhiqiao and Cai Jinghao 1994). It is also possible to understand 相 as a prefix to the verb without actual meaning; cf. 相：〔詞綴〕用在動詞前，作為動詞的前綴，已無實在意義，可不譯出 (*Ibidem*)



[Dao']an often annotated the sūtras but feared that [his interpretations] were not in tune with the principles [expounded in them]. So he pronounced a vow: "If my explanations are not very far from the principles, may I behold an auspicious sign!". He then dreamt a monk from the Western regions with white hair and long eyebrows who said to him: "Your annotations to the sūtras are very much in tune with the principles [expounded]. [As to me,] I have not [yet] obtained to enter nirvāṇa and I live in the Western Regions. I will help you in spreading [the doctrine]. From time to time you may make me an offering of food"

## 2.2 Geyi and the Chinese Tradition of Classical Studies

It is important to point out how the fundamental shift from *geyi* 格義 to textual analysis and then to translation which was completed in the last part of Dao'an's life reflects in the Buddhist sphere a major development that occurred in the mainstream Chinese commentarial tradition<sup>113</sup>. During the Han dynasty 東漢 (25 - 220 AD) the standard official interpretation of the Classics was based on the idea of the intimate correspondence and mutual influence between the cosmos and the human world (*tian ren ganying* 天人感應): the Classics embodied a cosmic truth that, however, was not self-evident in the surface text and the exegetes had to expose it by pointing out the correspondences between the text itself and the cosmos<sup>114</sup>. In this operation numerical categories (*in primis* the yin-yang 陰陽 and the Five Elements - *wu xing* 五行 -) played a major role<sup>115</sup>. This kind of exegesis resulted into a series of commentaries known as *zhangju* 章句 which greatly expanded on single expressions elaborating on them lengthy rambling explanations which completely disregarded the consistency of the text as a meaningful unit. At the beginning of the Eastern Han scholars like Wang Chong 王充 (ca. 27 - 100) and Xu Shen 許慎 (58? - 147?) had already pointed out the pitfalls of this kind of approach, but it was only towards the end of the dynasty that a strong antagonistic movement took shape; this was called the "Old Text" 古文 School<sup>116</sup> and counted among its most illustrious spokesmen eminent *literati* like Ma Rong 馬融 (79 - 166) and Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127 - 200)<sup>117</sup>. Continuing the practice started by the imperial librarian Liu Xin 劉歆 (1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE) of explaining the texts by relying on ancient commentaries (*zhuan* 傳)<sup>118</sup> rather than using cosmological theories, they opted for a more sober exegetical approach, aiming at "transmitting only what the earlier sages originally had in mind"<sup>119</sup> and trying to grasp the comprehensive meaning of a text rather than isolating single expressions and elaborating on them<sup>120</sup>. This exegetical style was greatly

<sup>112</sup> 時、時時、時即：（副）用在動詞之前。①表示事實的發生不是經常的，而是間或的。可譯作“偶爾” (Dong Zhiqiao and Cai Jinghao 1994).

<sup>113</sup> On the *geyi* practice and its relation to the Chinese exegetical tradition see Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 5, pp. 231 - 242 (for an English translation of this article see Tang Yongtong 1968).

<sup>114</sup> For example, the Five Classics were associated to the Five Elements 五行, the Five mythical Emperors 五王 etc.

<sup>115</sup> Numerous examples of these speculations based on numerology are found in the *Appendices to the Book of Changes* compiled at the beginning of the Han. These calculations were generally known as "study of shapes and numbers" (*xiang shu xue* 象數學).

<sup>116</sup> The expression "Old text" (*gu wen* 古文) refers here to a *corpus* of writings which survived the Qin auto-da-fé and was supposedly recovered in the house of Confucius during expanding works.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. on this Feng Youlan 1983, vol. 2, p. 137: "The Old Text school's major contribution was to sweep away the more extravagant and superstitious excesses of the New Text School, and to divorce Confucianism from that marriage with the Yin-yang school from which the New Text doctrine had sprung".

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Wagner 2000, p. 35" "Liu Xin began to read the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 as something like a commentary to the *Chunqiu* 春秋".

<sup>119</sup> "但念述先聖之元義思" (Zheng Xuan's biography 鄭玄傳, in *Hou Han shu* 後漢書, vol. 35)

<sup>120</sup> A very similar approach is presented by Dao'an in his *Preface to the Daoxing jing* 道行經序 [T224], p. 425, a3-b24: "[...] When attempting to explain this sūtra [the translation of the Daoxing Version of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*], one who analyses it at the level of the words to get at the point will blur the theme, while one who examines it sentence by sentence to check the meaning will lose the message. Why should that be so? Analyzing the text at the level of the words restricts one's understanding to the verbal constructs of contrasts and similarities, and examining the text sentence by sentence ties one's attention to the notions and ideas one will want

developed at the Jingzhou Academy 荊州學宮<sup>121</sup> and perfected by Wang Bi 王弼<sup>122</sup> (226 - 249) during the Zhengshi era 正始 of the Wei 魏 (240 - 249 CE). As Wagner explains, Wang Bi's approach

rejected the legitimacy of any reading strategy based on material or thought imposed from outside, and established the notion of the text as basically self-illuminating unit where the primary material for explanation and interpretation had to be taken from the text itself.

To relate Dao'an's new approach to the study of Buddhist texts to the great changes occurred in Confucian tradition since the end of the Eastern Han is by no means a simple hypothesis. In fact, the master himself and his collaborators explicitly mention exegetes like Ma Rong and Zheng Xuan, their approach to the Chinese Classics being regarded by them as a reference model when dealing with the foreign scriptures (on this important aspect see the section "2.4 Translation approach and the Classical scholarship" of this chapter).

### 2.3 Focusing on the translation activity

Once in Chang'an, Dao'an devoted most of his time and energies to the translation activity. The more new scriptures were introduced from the Western lands and translated<sup>123</sup>, the more Dao'an realized how mistaken his forerunners had been on many points<sup>124</sup>. Translation was then seen by him as a privileged pathway for gaining direct access to the true import of Buddhist teachings.

Because of the state patronage and the constant influx of Buddhist missionaries and texts from the West made possible by the territorial unification of Northern China under Fu Jian's rule<sup>125</sup>,

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to abstract from them. Concentrating on the words detracts from the final theme, while concentrating on the sentences makes one lose sight of the original purpose. If one can grasp the original purpose and carry it right through to the final interpretation, or if one can forget about the words and get the substance of the text as a whole, then one can understand the mystery of great wisdom [...]" 「凡論之者，考文以微 (read with variant 微) 其理者昏其趣者也；察句以驗其義者迷其旨者也。何則？考文則異同每為辭，尋句則觸類每為旨；為辭則喪其卒成之致，為旨則忽其始擬之義矣。若率初以要其終，或忘文以全其質者，則大智玄通居可知也。」《道行般若經》卷 1 (CBETA, T08, no. 224, p. 425, a27-b3) (translation from Cheung, Martha P. Y. 2014, pp. 71 - 72)

<sup>121</sup> On the importance of this center of studies see Tang Yongtong 200, vol. 4, pp. 73 - 76; Jiang Limei 2012, pp. 14 - 16; Wagner 2000, pp. 11 - 12 and pp. 45 - 51 in which the author states that "for the philosophical development of the search for the "meaning" of the classics, the Jingzhou Academy was of pivotal importance".

<sup>122</sup> The tides between Wang Bi's scholarship and the new exegetical approach developed at the Jingzhou Academy have been investigated by many scholars (see for example Tang Yongtong 1947, pp. 129 - 133 and Wagner 2000, pp. 12 - 13)

<sup>123</sup> These scriptures covered three main thematic areas, viz. 1. Texts on monastic discipline (vinaya); 2. Adhidharma literature of the Small Vehicle, again exclusively that of the Savāstivāda school; 3. The āgamas (see Zürcher 2007, p. 203)

<sup>124</sup> For example, after having carefully compared different translations of the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* Dao'an stated: "then I realized how deeply wrong (*shen miu* 深謬) the former masters had been and rejoiced for the great chance to have direct access to the foreign lands [of the West]" 「乃見前人之深謬。欣通外域之嘉會也。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 52, c19-20). A similar statement on the discovery of mistakes in older versions in the light of the new translated scriptures is found in the *Preface to the Abridged [Translation of the] Sarvāsti-vāda-vinaya-bhikṣu-pratimokṣa* 比丘大戒序: "Compared to this translation, the earlier translations of the vinaya [monastic discipline] had many inaccuracies; the message was seriously lost, or the meaning was crudely presented" 考前常行世戒，其謬多矣。或殊文旨。或粗舉意 (transl. from Cheung, Martha P. Y. 2014, p. 78)

<sup>125</sup> Through a rapid succession of wars of conquest Fu Jian had become the undisputed ruler of northern China, a huge empire that "eastwards extended to the ocean and westwards included Kucha; on the south encompassed Xiangyang, and on the north took in all the desert. Only the corner of Jianye had not yet been submitted" 東極滄海，西併龜茲。南苞襄陽，北盡沙漠。唯建業一隅未能[捉-曰+?] (read with variant 抗) 伏。」(Daoan's biography 道安傳, in *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], p. 353, a17-18). It is precisely on the basis of this newly established political and territorial unity that the relations between China and Central Asia suddenly greatly intensified. The rulers of the oasis states of Shanshan 鄯善, Khotan 於闐 and Kangju 康居 sent legations to Chang'an carrying gifts for the king in proof of their submission; at the same time a flow of new Buddhist scriptures (mainly Savāstivādin texts from

Dao'an's translation enterprise was no doubt larger in scale and broader in scope<sup>126</sup> than any other before.

The problem was that at their arrival in Chang'an the foreign masters<sup>127</sup> knew no or very little Chinese; when invited by Dao'an to recite a certain scripture (which they carried with themselves or knew by heart) they issued 出 it in the original language and the actual translation was made (in most cases) by the Chinese polyglot Zhu Fonian 竺佛念<sup>128</sup>, a monk from Liangzhou who is said to have been mediocre in the field of exegesis (*yixue* 義學) but who was invaluable to the team for his knowledge of Sanskrit and several Central Asian languages.

In the translation enterprise Dao'an acted as "general manager" and advisor. Closely collaborating with the state official and Buddhist devotee Zhao Zheng 趙整 (v. 政/正, fl. 375 - 392, a court-appointed supervisor)<sup>129</sup>, he developed and perfected the three-fold translation scheme which has been described above and adapted it each time to the specific circumstances of every translation, also choosing the most appropriate person for each duty.

Dao'an also formulated a series of views on translation known as "the five losses and the three difficulties" (*wu shi ben, san buyi* 五失本, 三不易) which constitute the first general, articulated and systematic discussion of the subject<sup>130</sup>. These views are notoriously difficult to interpret consistently<sup>131</sup> and even after many scholars have discussed them proposing different explanations<sup>132</sup>, Hurvitz and Link have admitted that "although these points (*viz.* the five losses and three difficulties) were undoubtedly clear to Tao-an's contemporaries, they are by no means easy to understand today"<sup>133</sup>.

I propose to understand them not as rules dictated to the translators but rather as general observations crystallizing years of experience in the field of translation and exegesis; on the one side, they must have constituted a sort of *vade mecum* on which basis interpreters and scribes

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Kucha - as it is known, during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD this kingdom had developed a close contact with Kashmir, real stronghold of the Savāstivāda tradition -) and an ever increasing number of foreign missionaries started arriving at the capital (see on this Tang Yongtong 2000, vol.1, p. 167, and *Jin shu* 晉書, vol. 86)

<sup>126</sup> A clear example is the translation of a consistent portion of the imposing *Savāstivāda Canon* which constitutes, as Zacchetti reminds, "one the most important translation projects in the history of Chinese Buddhism" (see Zacchetti 1996, p. 363, footnote 52)

<sup>127</sup> The most important figures are the Abhidharma specialists Saṅghabhadra 僧伽跋澄 and Saṅghadeva 僧伽提婆 from Kashmir, and the Vinaya master Dharmadhī (?) 曇摩侍, the *āgama* specialist Dharmanandin 曇摩難提 and the *ābhidharmika* Kumārabodhi 鳩摩羅菩提 from the Buddhist kingdoms of Central Asia.

<sup>128</sup> On Zhu Fonian 竺佛念 and the role he played in Dao'an's translation team see Zürcher 2007, p. 202, Palumbo 2013 (particularly pp. 83 - 94), Nattier 2010, Legittimo 2014, pp. 67 - 69 and Tang Yongtong 2000, vol.1, p. 168

<sup>129</sup> On this prominent figure of Dao'an's translation team see Palumbo 2013, pp. 29 - 31, 58 - 59 and pp. 217 - 220

<sup>130</sup> It is no coincidence that two centuries later when writing his *Bian zheng lun* 辯正論 (the first treatise comprehensively analyzing the problems involved in Buddhist translation) the monk Yancong 彥琮 (557-610) started his discussion precisely by relating Dao'an's "five losses and three difficulties"; the venerable patriarch was then praised for being a pioneer in that field of studies: "[Dao'an] perfectly knew the difficulties implied in the study of the Sanskrit scriptures, and carefully evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the [former] translators; it can be stated that he thoroughly understood the profound subtleties and was able to investigate what was deeply hidden.

「詳梵典 (add variant 之) 難易, 詮 (read with variant 銓) 譯人之得失。可謂洞入幽微能究深隱。」《續高僧傳》卷 2 (CBETA, T50, no. 2060, p. 438, b12-14) (Yancong's treatise is partially preserved in his biography in *Xu Gaosheng zhuan* 續高僧傳 [T2060], vol. 2, p. 436, b15-p. 439, c16).

<sup>131</sup> Are the "five losses" to be interpreted as allowed divergences from the original, as transgressions not to be committed or as merely unavoidable deviations? Are the *sanbuyi* to be understood as "three difficulties" or rather as "three things not to be changed" (both translations are possible)? Problems also arise when examining synoptically the "five losses and three difficulties" and the translation guidelines decided for the rendering of specific texts as they are presented in many of Dao'an's prefaces; in fact, such comparative analysis shows that, whether the former were considered as a set of injunctions, they would not have been always applied in a consistent way.

<sup>132</sup> For an overview of the different opinions see Hurvitz and Link 1974, pp. 425 - 426. See also Zürcher 2007, p. 203 and notes p. 393; C'hen 1960, p. 183; Ren Jiyu 1985, pp. 182 - 183; Wang Wenyan 1984, pp. 205 - 206; Wang Tiejun 2006, pp. 104 - 105

<sup>133</sup> Hurvitz and Link 1974, p. 425

could ponder pros and cons before autonomously making specific choices (see Sengrui's statement below); on the other, they must have provided a reference framework on which basis the specific guidelines for the translation of each sūtra were decided during the preparatory meetings<sup>134</sup>: sometimes the “five losses” were allowed *in toto*, some others only in part, apparently according to the nature of the text and its features. Such careful planning would have helped guarantee a higher degree of coherence and homogeneity in the translation output while setting limitations to the freedom (which was often regarded as arbitrariness) of the interpreter in a situation in which nobody except him could understand both the source text (many times with great difficulty) and the translation output as it was written down by the scribe<sup>135</sup>.

The “five losses and three difficulties” are related by Dao'an in a preface to a new version of the *Prajñāpāramitā*<sup>136</sup>:

譯胡為秦，有五失本也。一者，胡語盡倒而使從秦，一失本也。二者，胡經尚質，秦人好文，傳可眾心非文不合，斯二失本也。三者，胡經委悉，至於嘆詠，丁寧 (read with variant 叮嚀) 反覆，或三或四，不嫌其煩，而今裁斥，三失本也。四者，胡有義記 (read with variant 說)，正<sup>137</sup>似亂辭，尋說向語，文無以異，或千五百，刈而不存，四失本也。五者，事已全成，將更傍及，反騰前辭，已乃後說，而悉除此，五失本也。然般若經，三達之心，覆面所演。聖必因時，時俗有易，而刪雅古以適今時，一不易也。愚智天隔，聖人叵階，乃欲以千歲之上微言，傳使合百王之下末俗，二不易也。

<sup>134</sup> During these meetings we sometimes notice a constructive dialectic between the organizers Zhao Zheng and Dao'an and the operators aiming at finding out in each case the best viable options. For example, 1. Dao'an's *Preface to [the Translation of] the Vibhāṣā-śāstra* 鞞婆沙序 relates that Zhao Zheng required that the text be rendered as literally as possible, “everyone approved [and agreed that] Zhao's remarks were indeed correct. Hence the text was translated by strictly following the source text [...]” 眾咸稱善，斯真實言也。遂案本而傳 [...] (*Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], p. 73, c15-22); 2. the *Preface to the Abridged [Translation of the] Sarvāstivāda vinaya bhikṣu prātimokṣa* 比丘大戒序 relates that Dao'an ordered Huichang to remove the redundant parts of the text, but the monk argued against it and eventually “everyone approved [Huichang's opinion], hence the Sanskrit text was followed [*in toto*] except when the syntax was inverted and had to be smoothed.” 3. We know from Zhu Fonian's biography in *Chu sanzang jiji* that Zhao Zheng asked Saṃghabhadra 跋澄 to issue the *Collection of Vasumitra* 婆須蜜經 but at that time none of the renowned virtuous men 名德 was able to translate it; “everyone proposed [Fo]nian for this task, hence Saṃghabhadra held the original text [and recited it], while [Fo]nian translated the Hu-language into Chinese” 眾咸推念，於是澄執梵文。念譯胡漢 (*Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], p. 111, b15-16).

On the basis of the above information, we should speak in favor of Dao'an's intellectual honesty and rigorous scholarship which made him open to the criticism and suggestions of his collaborators. This would perhaps contribute to ‘soften’ the harsh characterization of the monk (however, no doubt realistic) made by Palumbo “[...] we should not fail to appreciate the potential extent of Dao'an's interference with the translations of his group. He was always there ‘ordering’ (*ling* 令) foreign masters and Chinese monks alike to do what he wanted, imposing gruelling schedules, closing texts with his own revisions, and occasionally demanding to issue scriptures all over again. He would make and unmake translations, and he alone had the authority to do so, both in view of his long established charisma and of his uniquely privileged position at the Qin court, which invested him with a decisive additional layer of political leverage” (Palumbo 2013, p. 93)

<sup>135</sup> A fair account of Zhu Fonian's approach to translation is given by the interpreter himself in a preface to the translation of the avādana of Dharmavardhana [T2045] issued by Dharmananda in A.D. 391: “[When I,] Fonian, interpret, my intentions are straight but the reality is difficult. Sometimes I depart from the text to approach the meaning, or I fix the knotty points understanding from the context. Sometimes I get explanations from the reciter, or if the substance is abridged I add the details. I hope that future scholars be made to see whatever felicity or infelicity survives. Should there be the slightest embellishment, it is all written in stone from the early signs. 「佛念譯音。情義實難。或離文而就義。或正滯而傍通。或取解於誦人。或事略而曲備。冀將來之學士令。鑒罪福之不朽設。有毫釐潤色者。盡銘之於萌兆」 (*Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145] vol. 7, p. 51, c12-15) (transl. by Palumbo, see Palumbo 2013, p. 89)

<sup>136</sup> Namely, the *Mohe boluoruo boluomi jing chao* 摩訶鉢羅若波羅蜜經抄 (dated 382 AD). This preface is preserved in the *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 8, p. 52, b8-c21. For previous translations of this passage see Hurvitz and Link 1974, pp. 425 - 428, and Cheung 2014, pp. 79 - 83.

<sup>137</sup> 正: (2) 用在動詞、形容詞前，表示程度極高。可譯為“極”、“很”、“甚” (Dong Zhiqiao and Cai Jinghao 1994)

阿難出經，去佛未久，尊 (read with variant 尊者) 大迦葉，令五百六通迭察迭書。今離千年，而以近意量截 (read with variant 裁)。彼阿羅漢乃兢兢若此，此生死人而平平若此！豈將不知法者，勇乎？斯三不易也。涉茲五失經、三不易，譯胡為秦，詎可不慎乎？」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 52, b23-c10)

When translating from Hu-language<sup>138</sup> to Chinese [one should keep in mind that] there are five [circumstances in which] the source text is lost. 1. When the Hu-language word order is reversed so to adapt to the [rules of the] Chinese [language], the source text is lost; 2. The Hu-language sūtras have a predilection for the plain [literary] style whereas the Chinese are fond of the refined style. When one pursues the adherence of the translation to the taste of the many and [wants] the text at any cost to be refined, then the source text is lost; 3. The Hu-language texts are very detailed and, especially when it comes to eulogies, repetitions are endless, [the same thing being repeated even] three or four times without finding it verbose. Now, when [those repetitions] are shortened or left out the source text is lost; 4. In the Hu-language [sūtras] annotations [in verses] are found which closely resemble the *luan*ci [that are found in the Chinese *cifu* 辭賦 compositions]. They repeat again and again what has [already] been said before without the letter differing [that much]; they range from five hundred to one thousand words. When [these sections] are erased, the source text is lost; 5. [In the Hu-language sūtras] after a certain topic has been fully related, this is dealt with again, after a digression on former topics. When all [these repetitions] are erased, the source is lost. [The translation activity also presents three difficulties:] 1. Let us take the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* as an example. The wisdom of the three realizations has been expounded by [the Buddha] with his longue broad tongue. The Sage (i.e. the Buddha) necessarily [preaches] adapting to the [customs of his own] age, but those customs always change. Now, to erase those elaborate ancient expressions and adapt [the text] to the modern [audience] is the first difficulty; 2. There is a natural gap between the foolish and the wise, and no one can equal the Sage (i.e. the Buddha) any more than he can climb [a stairway to the heavens]<sup>139</sup>. To translate nevertheless those subtle words of a thousand years ago adapting them to the customs of this age of decline that comes after the reign of a hundred kings is the second difficulty; 3. When Ānanda issued the sūtras shortly after the death of the Buddha, the honorable Mahākāśyapa asked the Five Hundred [Great Disciples] endowed with the six supernatural powers to carefully examine those texts. A thousand years have elapsed since then, and now we use our present-day understanding to evaluate and assess [those writings]. [But] how outstanding those arhats were, and how average we [present-day] mortals are! Isn't it daring to [translate] teachings which are not [fully] understood? This is the third difficulty in translating.

When meeting with [the circumstances exemplified in] these “five losses and three difficulties”, how could one not be cautious translating from Hu-language to Chinese?

This set of views on translation is also mentioned in an anonymous colophon to the *Sengjialuoshajijing* 僧伽羅剎集經後記<sup>140</sup> preserved in *Chusanjangji* 出三藏記集 [T2145]:

且婆須蜜經及曇摩難提口誦增一阿含并幻網經，使佛念為譯人。念迺學通內外，才辯多奇。常疑西域言繁質，謂此土好華。每存瑩飾文句，滅 (read with variant 減) 其繁長。安公、趙郎之所深疾。窮校考定，務在 (read with variant 存) 典骨。既方俗不同，許其五失胡本，出此以外，毫不可差。“五失”如安公大品序所載《出三藏記集》卷 10 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 71, b24-c7)

<sup>138</sup> As Boucher has pointed out, the term Hu-language (*Huyu* 胡語) - translated by many as “barbarian language” - is actually very problematic. Sometimes it is used as a synonym of Fan 梵 (Sanskrit), but in many of our early Chinese Buddhist records it can also bear the more technical sense of kharoṣṭī script. In any case, the term does not carry any derogatory connotation (see Boucher 2000)

<sup>139</sup> A reference to the *Confucian Analects*, chapt. 19: “One cannot equal the Master (viz. Confucius) anymore than one can climb a stairway to the heavens.” 夫子之不可及也，猶天之不可階而升也 (*Confucian Analects*, 19)

<sup>140</sup> *Collected texts by Saṃgharakṣa*, translated by Saṃghabhūti 僧伽跋澄 in 384 AD

As for the *Vasumitra Collected Śāstras* and the *Ekottarikāgamas* and *Sūtra of the Illusory Net* orally recited by Dharmanandi, they let Zhu Fonian act as bilingual interpreter. [Fo]nian had studied and mastered the Buddhist and secular literature. His intelligence and eloquence were stunning.

He always blamed the fact that the languages of the Western Regions were verbose and not refined, and held that in this land [of China] the elaborate style was [instead] appreciated. Once [in translating] he maintained the ornamented sentences [as they were found in the original text] and reduced the parts that were excessively lengthy. Dao'an and Zhao Zheng deeply disapproved that. They personally revised the translation, examined [the text] and established [its definitive version] with the aim of preserving the essential meaning of the scripture.

Since the local (*viz.* the Chinese) customs differed [from those to which the original texts referred to], they allowed him (i.e. Fonian) to deviate from the original in five [specific] circumstances, but apart from those [they wanted the Chinese version] not to present the slightest divergence [from the original]. The “five losses” are those exposed by Dao'an in his *Preface to the Larger Prajñāpāramitā*.

Even though this document is, as Palumbo demonstrated, an apocryphal work probably written in the South towards the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>141</sup>, the author might have been well informed about the translation practices of Dao'an's enterprise and, in this case, his reference to the use of the “five losses” as guidelines for setting restrictions to the choices made by the interpreter would confirm my understanding.

Many of the difficulties constantly encountered by Dao'an's translation team gradually faded away with Kumārajīva's arrival in Chang'an. In fact, the Kuchean translator's good command of the Chinese language and his broad knowledge of the context and philosophical content of Buddhist scriptures (particularly, albeit not exclusively, Mahāyāna) provided the translation équipe with a solid ground for correctly understanding and translating the sūtras. Even so, it is important to point out that - as I will show in detail - the shift from the Dao'an's era to the Kumarajiva's one was by no means characterized by an abrupt change; rather, it was a transition in which the personnel trained under Dao'an played a fundamental role: the linguistic and exegetical talents of the Kuchean translator could bear fruits only thanks to the fertile terrain prepared in Chang'an since the 380s. Being so, it is not at all surprising that Dao'an's translation guidelines continued to be influential at least until the first years of the Kumārajīva's era, during the first years of the fifth century. In fact, we find them mentioned by Sengrui 僧叡 in his preface to the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* 大品經 translated by Kumārajīva (the translation started in 403 AD). The monk, who was assisting as scribe, clearly says:

「予既知命，遇此真化。敢竭微誠，屬當譯任。執筆之際，三惟亡師“五失及三不易”之誨。則憂懼交懷，惕焉若厲<sup>142</sup>。雖復履薄、臨深<sup>143</sup>，未足喻也。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 53, a28-b2)

At the age of fifty I met with [this age of] holy conversion and wholeheartedly accepted the duty of [taking part in the] translation [activity]. When holding the brush [for writing down the words of the translated text] I repeatedly ponder on the instructions of my late master [Dao'an], *viz.* the “five losses and three difficulties”. Then a mixed feeling of worriedness and apprehension arises in me and I become cautious like when facing a great danger, [to the point that] even [expressions like] “walking on thin ice” and “nearing the abyss” fall short in describing [my state of mind].

<sup>141</sup> See Palumbo 2013, pp. 85 - 88

<sup>142</sup> *Xi ti ruo li* 夕惕若厲 (quote from the *Yijing* 易經 - *Hexagram qian* 乾)

<sup>143</sup> *Lin shen libo* 臨深履薄 (quote from *Shijing* 詩經 - *Xiao ya* 小雅 - *Xiao min* 小旻)

Sengrui was one of the closest collaborators of Kumārajīva and acted as scribe in the translation of many fundamental scriptures delivered by the Kuchean master, writing also prefaces to many of them. The fact that he still valued the former master's views and regarded the "five losses and three difficulties" as a sort of compass for navigating the rough sea of Buddhist interpretation is highly significant.

## 2.4 Translation approach and the Classical scholarship

In trying to find out a viable approach to the translation of foreign texts so radically alien to the Chinese tradition both in style and content, Dao'an and his collaborators (no matter how misleadingly) often took the Chinese classical scholarship as a reference model: the relation between the ancient Chinese Classics and modern readers became a mirror for reasoning upon the ways and methods to treat and interpret Buddhist texts<sup>144</sup>. For example, in his *Preface to A Collation of [the Translation of] Extracts from the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* 摩訶鉢羅若波羅蜜經抄序 Dao'an states that:

若夫以《詩》為煩重，以《尚》為質朴，而刪令合今，則馬、鄭所深恨者也《出三藏記集》卷8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 52, c15-16)

If someone were to say that the *Book of Odes* was tedious and repetitive and the *Book of History* was unhewn and plain, and were to go ahead to trim and rework these two works in accordance with today's tastes, that would have been harshly disapproved by Ma [Rong] and Zheng [Xuan].

In Dao'an's opinion, the Chinese classics which passed down the words of the sages of old had an authoritative status comparable to that of the Buddhist sūtras. They couldn't be surreptitiously altered in order to suite the modern taste; rather, they had to be preserved in their original outlook and investigated and explained respectfully. The implications contained in Dao'an's reference to the two prominent exegetes of the late Later Han Ma Rong 馬融 (79 - 166) and Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127 - 200) are not easy to grasp in full. However, it seems clear that the Buddhist master kept in high regard and wanted to emulate their particular style of scholarship, which was characterized *in primis* by a high respect for the original texts and an accurate investigation of their meaning through a rigorous philological approach. As Mark L. Asselin pointed out, "Zheng Xuan's greatest contribution to the study of the Classics was his reconciling various versions of the Confucian scriptures, including *Guwen* and *Jinwen*<sup>145</sup> texts, and creating a new synthesis using his prodigious knowledge of the canon to sort out what was true and what was spurious"; "Zheng Xuan's methodology was to edit a recension based on available texts, and in his commentaries add glosses to difficult words, provide historical context and other information as needed, and offer some interpretation."<sup>146</sup> Hashimoto Hidemi, who has studied in detail the characteristics of Zheng Xuan's style of interpretation<sup>147</sup>, has explained that, besides embracing some fundamental methodological guidelines of the group of scholars belonging to the Old Text School (namely, 1. Not to hold on exclusively to one's own school or exegetical tradition (*bu ju jiafa* 不拘家法); 2. To rely on the extensive study of a vast amount of texts (*guang can wenxian* 廣參文獻); 3. To value reasonableness when formulating explanations

<sup>144</sup> I could not find in secondary literature studies on this interesting aspect of Dao'an's translation practice. In this section I have collected the primary sources on the topic and tried to investigate their implications; however, the material is scanty and does not allow any in-depth discussion.

<sup>145</sup> On the meaning of the expressions *Jinwen* 今文 and *Guwen* 古文 during the Han and the complex "historical reconstruction" of the controversy between New Text and Old Text School under the Qing see Van Hess 1994 and 1999.

<sup>146</sup> See Mark L. Asselin's entry on "Zheng Xuan" in YAO Xinzhong (ed.) 2003, p. 815

<sup>147</sup> See Hidemi's articles «Lun Zheng Wang lishuo yi tong» 論鄭王禮說異同 (pp. 157 - 174) and «Zheng Xuan diyi yuanze» 鄭學第一原則 (pp. 229 - 250), p. 229 in Hidemi 2013 (b)



(zhuzhong heli 注重合理)), he showed a special respect for the original text, whose contradictions and incongruences were not forcefully “smoothed” or “adjusted” for the sake of a plain understanding.

Zheng Xuan - Hashimoto explains - was also convinced that each word acquired a certain meaning only in the specific context in which it was found (*sui wen qiu yi* 隨文求義, *ji wen wei shuo* 即文為說), and thus refrained from the practice of defining terms *a priori* and then applying those meaning to the occurrences found in the text<sup>148</sup>; over time, the praxis of careful analysis of the context pursued by the exegete led to the construction of a vast and articulated exegetical system which in turn served as a methodologic tool for confronting the textual complexity (which often bordered confusion) of the ancient classics.

Curiously, during the translation of the *Sarvāstivāda bhikṣu prātimokṣa* 比丘大戒 in 382 a similar argument referring to Chinese traditional scholarship was upheld by the monk Huichang 慧常 (who was acting as scribe) to oppose Dao'an's proposition of making some exceptions to the rules and remove the redundant parts of the text. In that occasion, Huichang had left his seat and declared that such choice would be inappropriate; in fact, he argued,

「此土《尚書》及與《河》、《洛》。其文樸質，無敢措手。明祇先王之法言，而順神命也。何至佛戒聖賢所貴，而可改之以從方言乎？[...]

」《出三藏記集》卷 11 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 80, b15-18)

In this land [of China] nobody dares to alter the *Book of History* and the [Yellow] River Diagram and Luo Writing, even though their letter is simple and unadorned. This is because everybody keeps in the highest regard the exemplary words of the Former Kings, and accord to their divine mandate. For what reason then could the Buddhist prescriptions - which are kept in high regard by the sages and worthies - be altered in order to accord to [the conventions of] the Chinese language?

The fact that Dao'an accepted Huichang's criticism and eventually desisted from his initial intention proves that this argument was a particularly powerful one and that the close connection and analogy between Chinese classical scholarship and the translation of Buddhist text was regarded as a fact and given for granted among Dao'an's entourage.

In another occasion Zhao Zheng, who is elsewhere praised by Dao'an as being “a *literatus* well versed in the antiquities and in the [textual] exegesis”<sup>149</sup>, also referred to the Chinese classical literary tradition for illustrating the differences between the foreign language and Chinese. As it is related in Dao'an's *Preface to the Vibhāsā-śāstra* 鞞婆沙序:

「趙郎謂譯人曰：“《爾雅》有〈釋古〉〈釋言〉者，明古今不同也。昔來出經者，多嫌胡言方質而改適今俗。此政所不取也。何者？傳胡為秦，以不開 (read with variant 閑) 方言，求知辭趣耳。何嫌文質？文質是時，幸勿易之。經之巧質，有自來矣。唯傳事不盡，乃譯人之咎耳。眾咸稱善。[...]」《出三藏記集》卷 10 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 73, c15-20)

Zhao Zheng said to those involved in the translation [of the *Vibhāsā-śāstra* (A Treatise on the Infinite Immanence of Dharma)]: “The [Chinese classic] *Literary Expositor* contains the chapters ‘*Shigu*’ [Explanation of Ancient Terms] and ‘*Shiyan*’ [Explanation of [ancient] Words]”, which clarify the differences between olden-day and present-day meanings. Over the ages many sūtra translators, disliking the unhewn simplicity of Hu-language, altered it to suit today's customs and preferences. I do not think this is acceptable. Why not? To translate Hu-language into Chinese is to enable people who do not know that language to understand

<sup>148</sup> This is, Hidemi says, the method generally followed by the Qing scholars, who devoted a great effort to compiling dictionaries and lexicons explaining the meaning of terms (see Hidemi 2013 (b), p. 248).

<sup>149</sup> 「好古、索隱之士」(*Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 10, p. 73, c1)



the intricate meaning embodied in the words; so why criticize the unhewn simplicity of the language? Besides, both refined and unhewn compositions are products of their time. One does well not to change this. Whether a sūtra is felicitous or unhewn in style is determined by intrinsic reasons of its own. But if the events are not communicated in full, the translator is at fault.” Everyone agreed (transl. from Cheung 2014, p. 85).

Again, the reference to the Chinese tradition of classical studies serves to support the view that the Buddhist sūtras should not be adapted in language and style to the present-day taste. If needed (Zhao Zheng seems to suggest by referring to the Chinese lexicons), the difficult or archaic words and expressions should be clarified through *ad hoc* separate explanations.

The explicit reference to Chinese classical scholarship as a model for conducting the translation of Buddhist sūtras will be discarded during the Kumārajīva’s era. This notwithstanding, - as I will show - the Confucian exegesis (particularly the Xuanxue interpretative approach) continued to exert a very strong influence on the Chinese collaborators of the Kuchean master.

## 2.5 Annotated explanations (*zhujie* 注解) deriving from questions to the translator<sup>150</sup>

It is clear from Dao’an’s prefaces to the texts translated in Chang’an that one of his major concerns was to set limits to the arbitrariness of the interpreter’s choices and clearly separate translation (which had to be as literal as possible) from explanation or, so to speak, distinguish “facts” from “interpretations”. If necessary, those explanations had to be asked to the issuer of the text, and his answers be transcribed in small characters beneath the main text. The *Si ahan mu chao jie* 四阿含暮抄解 (*Commentary on a Digest of the Four Āgamas*) [T1505] translated in late 382 from a manuscript Kumārabuddhi had brought to Chang’an from Turfan is in this regard an exemplary text which allows us to glimpse into the evolution of Buddhist exegesis during the late fourth century<sup>151</sup>.

As we know from his preface, Dao’an required that Fonian 佛念 translate the text as literally as possible, not altering its style; and “if there still are categories or terms whose meaning is uncertain, [he should] ask ‘that man’ (*qiren* 其人; evidently referring to “the issuer” of the text) and annotate [his explanations] beneath the text”<sup>152</sup>. If we examine the text in question, indeed we find the transcript of many explanations provided by Kumārabuddhi; even though they are but short glosses, they contain *in nuce* many of the elements which will become central in Kumārajīva’s oral exegesis and thus can throw some light on the evolution of this kind of exegetical practice. Below, I will briefly consider some of those glosses (in all quotes the sūtra text comes first, and glosses follow in brackets) which I have grouped under different thematic categories.

### a. Glosses clarifying the meaning of terms

In the commentary glosses are found which provide some extra information about a term, or provide synonyms or equivalents to it through the usual formula “A, B 也”:

<sup>150</sup> To the best of my knowledge, this aspect of the translation practice carried on by Dao’an and his collaborators has not been investigated before. The dispersed glosses contained in T1505 that I have collected, translated and discussed in this section did not constitute the object of any dedicated study.

<sup>151</sup> This scripture attributed to the arhat Vasubhadra 婆素跋陀 (Chin. *Shanxian* 山賢) is a commentary on a digest of the Four Āgamas. During the translation, the text was issued by Kumārabuddhi 鳩摩羅佛提, orally translated by Fonian 佛念 and Fohu 佛護, and written down by Sengdao 僧導, Tanjiu 曇究 and Sengrui 僧叡 (a partial English translation is found in Hurvitz 1967). A different translation of the same text was produced in the South at Mt. Lu by Saṃghadeva 僧伽提婆 on Huiyuan’s 慧遠 request. The translation was undertaken in 391 and was entitled *San fadu lun* 三法度論 [T 1506]; Huiyuan’s preface is preserved in *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 10, p. 73, a2-29

<sup>152</sup> 「近勅譯人，直令轉胡為秦。解方言而已。經之文、質所不敢易也。又有懸數、懸事，皆訪其人，為注其下。」 (*Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 9, p. 64, c18-21)

「如末迦蘭、富蘭 (六師之二) [...]。」《四阿含抄解》卷 1 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 2, c16-17)

As Makkhali Gosāla and Purāṇa Kassapa (they are two of the Six [Heterodox] masters) [...]

「是意三無住：相應、過去、當來 (相應，現在也。住、止也)。」《四阿含抄解》卷 1 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 4, c20)

This mind has three non-abidings: the elements it comes in contact with, the past, the future (“elements it comes in contact with” indicates the present. “Abiding” means “to reside”)

## b. Explanation of transliterated terms

Some annotations relate the actual meaning of transliterated Sanskrit terms. These explanations, which are often introduced by the expression *Qin yan* 秦言 (“in Chinese it means”), are always confined to the meaning of a word in the specific context in which it appears, and no attempt is made to provide a detailed etymological analysis:

阿含暮 (秦言 “趣無”) 《四阿含抄解》卷 1 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 1, b7)

Āgama (in Chinese means “ultimate [truth]”)<sup>153</sup>

鼻奈耶 (律也，秦言 “志真”也) 《四阿含抄解》卷 1 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 2, c3)

Vinaya ([indicates the] monastic rules; in Chinese it means “the set one’s mind upon the authentic”)

婆素跋陀 (秦言 “今賢”，人名也，得無著道) 《四阿含抄解》卷 1 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 4, a12-13)

Vasubhadra (in Chinese means “actual sage”, it is a man’s name. He had reached the stage of non-attachment)

兜率陀 (秦言 “止足天” [...]) 《四阿含抄解》卷 2 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 12, b15-16)

Tuṣṭita (in Chinese it means “heaven of satisfaction”)

## c. References to the Indian lore

References are also made to Indian customs and lore in order to explain the text and its features; sometimes differences with the Chinese counterpart are also pointed out. These explanations are often introduced by *Tianzhu* 天竺 (“in India...”), or *waiguo* 外國 (“in the foreign country...”). For example, the title of the first chapter is followed by the comment below:

「四阿含抄解 第一 (此土篇目題皆在首，是故道安為斯題)」《四阿含抄解》卷 1 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 1, b2-3)

*Commentary on a Digest of the Four Āgamas, chapter 1* (in this land [of China] the titles of the chapters are written at the beginning, for this reason Dao’an wrote this title)

and at the end of the same chapter it is reminded that:

「(盡也，天竺品題皆在品後也)。」《四阿含抄解》卷 1 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 4, a13)

(This is the end [of the chapter]. [In fact,] in India titles are written at the end of the chapters)

<sup>153</sup> See Soothill 2010: “阿含 āgama, 阿含暮; 阿含; 阿伽摩 (or 阿笈摩), the āgamas, a collection of doctrines, general name for the Hīnayāna scriptures: tr. 法歸 the home or collecting-place of the Law or Truth; 無比法 peerless Law; or 趣無 ne plus ultra, ultimate, absolute truth”.

Some other comments relate other traditions of the Indian world:

「如時盡具，當手授作 (外國婚禮，夫親迎女。女氏具送女之具，澡夫手，父以女手授，故云爾)」《四阿鎗暮抄解》卷 1 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 8, a19-20)

If at that time they have all [the gifts], the hand will be given (when a wedding is celebrated in the foreign country, the groom personally receives the bride. When the bride's family has prepared the dowry, the groom's hands are washed and the father gives the daughter's hand to him)

「及輪搗眾生，肉爛盡 (輪，外國輪壓油，傷眾生)。」「《四阿鎗暮抄解》卷 2 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 13, a28-29)

Then the wheel smashes the beings and their flesh is completely shredded ([as to the] wheel, in the foreign country a [stone] wheel is used to [press the seeds and] produce oil, [but here in hell it is used] to hurt the beings)

「以熱鐵椎擊破首。此間人為重事 (外國考囚，重者八十 (read with variant 十八)、輕考 (read with variant 者) 三十六)。」「《四阿鎗暮抄解》卷 2 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 13, b4-5)

[Their] head is hit with a red-hot iron hammer. Those who are found in this place have committed serious sins (in the foreign country when prisoners are tortured there are eighteen hard punishments and thirty-six light ones).

#### d. References to the Sanskrit language and record of the issuer's observations on the translated version

A few glosses deal with matters related to the Sanskrit language:

「彼受教授名“命”(天竺音“命”與“眾生”同也)」《四阿鎗暮抄解》卷 2 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 10, a5-6)

That receiving instructions is called “to command” (in the Indian [language the words] “command” and “living [beings]” are pronounced in the same way)

「我是衢黠王 (梵言“衢黠 (read with variant 一)”十名，羊也、眼也、地也、天也、水 (read with variant 火) 也、說也、方也、金剛也、光也、剪 (read with variant 箭) 也。如是比，有十也。其人不了是十生 (read with variant 之) 中何也)」《四阿鎗暮抄解》卷 2 (CBETA, T25, no. 1505, p. 10, a14-15)

I am the king Quxia (In Sanskrit the sound “qu” corresponds to ten [different] words: goat, eye, earth, heaven, fire, explanation, direction, diamond, light, arrow. Listed like this, they amount to ten. That man (i.e. the issuer [of the text]) does not know which one among these ten is the [correct] meaning [for this context])

In the above quote the scribe has recorded a doubt in the interpretation of a term expressed by the issuer of the text (in this case, Kumārabuddhi). The “issuer” (which is called, as in Dao'an's preface, “that man” (*qiren* 其人<sup>154</sup>) is mentioned also in other annotations, where his views on the text are related (e.g. to point out that certain parts of the text belong to the sūtra and not to the commentary, that certain terms are missing and ought to be inserted in a certain place etc.<sup>155</sup>).

<sup>154</sup> On the use of the expression “that man” (*qiren* 其人) in the commentary *Fenbie gongde lun* 分別功德論 (T1507), also produced by Dao'an translation equipe, see Palumbo 2013, pp. 185 - 190

<sup>155</sup> See for example the following annotations: 「[...] 其人，上三至“厭鬼”，亦修妬路也)」(*Si ahanmu chao jie* 四阿鎗暮抄解 [T1505], vol. 2, p. 13, c21); 「( [...] “問”已下十一字，其人著 (add variant 也))。」「(*Ibidem*, vol. 2 p. 14, c2-3); 「(其人謂此句弟子言 (add variant 也))」(*Ibidem*, vol. 1, p. 8, a7-8); 「(其人云：此中應有“失憂”)」(*Ibidem*, vol. 2, p. 8, c28-29); 「(其人云：“怨”上當有“親”字也)。」(*Ibidem*, vol. 2, p. 9, a18)

Evidently, most of these annotations were inserted in the translated text through small inter-linear characters during the revision process. This phenomenon confirms Zacchetti's observation that in this period for the first time the revision work started to be included in the translation process itself rather than being relegated to a second phase that could have taken place much later after the translation was completed<sup>156</sup>.

As I will show in the next chapter, also in the case of Kumārajīva's translations the revision process very likely immediately followed the translation. This is proved *inter alia* by the fact that some entries of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* relate the assessments of the issuer (*viz.* Kumārajīva) on the rendering of certain terms and expressions found in the text.

Literal translation and the use of annotations as a bridge to the understanding of a text mark the point of arrival of Dao'an's exegetical quest. This long search culminated in the attempt of establishing a method (including procedures and guidelines) for ensuring a higher degree of reliability of translated texts and for limiting errors and mistakes.

*Mutatis mutandis*, the change of Dao'an's attitude towards the translated Buddhist texts during his lifetime reminds the evolution of Chinese historiography as it has been described by Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895 - 1990), *viz.* as a process going through the three phases of 1.complete faith in the ancient history as it was related by traditional sources (*xin gu* 信古), 2.skepticism about the reliability of those sources (*yi gu* 疑古), and finally 3.explanation of the materials contained in those sources through textual research and the "new science" of archeology (*shi gu* 釋古). This last phase marks the emergence of a method for ascertaining the truth of the sources with a higher degree of reliability which would allow to slowly construct a more reliable account of the ancient history<sup>157</sup>. Thanks to the explanatory apparatus provided, such an account could always be improved over time on the basis of newly found evidence.

## 2.6 Official supervision and patronage

The court supervision on Dao'an's translation activity is evident from the sources. The high court official Zhao Zheng 趙整<sup>158</sup>, who served the king Fu Jian 苻堅 as prefect (*taishou* 太守) and secretary (*mishu lang* 秘書郎) took active part in organizing the translations work, giving instructions to the bilingual interpreters and revising the final versions. Being himself a Buddhist devotee, Zhao Zheng wished to take the vows and become a Buddhist monk but was not allowed to do so by the ruler, and it was only after the death of Fu Jian (385 AD) that he finally accomplished his wish and changed his secular name into Daozheng 道整.

Even though we may suppose that Fu Jian financially supported the translation activity, we still find in the sources mentions to some lay "supporters" (*tanyue* 檀越, Skr. *danapati*)<sup>159</sup>.

## 3. Kumārajīva's translation enterprise

By the end of the year 401 the Kuchean master Kumārajīva entered Chang'an and was put in charge by the ruler of the Later Qin 後秦 Yao Xing 姚興 of a huge translation enterprise which not only produced new and more accurate versions of many fundamental Mahāyāna scriptures<sup>160</sup> but also translated for the first time into Chinese the basic texts of the Mādhyamika scholastic

<sup>156</sup> See Zacchetti 1996, p. 364

<sup>157</sup> On this three-folded evolution of Chinese historiography see the influential article by Li Xueqin (Li Xueqin 1994)

<sup>158</sup> On this important figure see Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 167 and Ren Jiyu 1985, p.183

<sup>159</sup> See for example the *Preface to the (?) Abhidharmahrdaya* 阿毘曇心序 in *Chu sanzang jiji*: 「時眾僧上座竺僧根支、僧純等八十人。地主江州、刺史王凝之、優婆塞西陽太守任固之為檀越。並共勸佐而興立焉。」《出三藏記集》 [T2145], vol. 10, p. 72, b25-28) ]

<sup>160</sup> Among them, the *Lesser* 小品 [T227] and *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* 大品 [T223], the *Lotus sūtra* 妙法華經 [T262], the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* 維摩詰所說經 [T475] and the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* 十住經 [T286]

literature<sup>161</sup> which supplied the “philosophical key” for correctly understanding the true import of the *Prajñāpāramitā*.

Even though Kumārajīva is no doubt a major figure in the development of Chinese Buddhism and his activity marks a watershed in the history of Chinese Buddhist translation, the success of his translation *équipe* owes much to the awareness and techniques developed in Chang’an by his forerunners, particularly Dao’an, and to the experienced and highly trained Chinese exegete-monks who assisted him. As Zürcher clearly stated,

In the Guanzhong 關中 area—the ancient metropolitan region of Chang’an—the [“formative period” of Chinese Buddhism] is concluded with the many sided activities of Dao’an in the years 379 - 385 CE, under the patronage of the ruler of the former Qin, because at that time a state of maturity was reached in terms of religious ideas, monastic organization, and translation work. For that reason the activities of Kumārajīva and his school at Chang’an in the first decade of the fifth century have only been summarily treated [in the *Buddhist Conquest of China*], for in spite of the momentous importance of Kumārajīva and his Chinese disciples, they could build upon the foundation already laid by Dao’an and his imperial patron.<sup>162</sup>

In this section I will deal with the organization of the Buddhist translation activity during Kumārajīva’s era, first pointing out its continuity with the past and then showing its innovations.

### 3.1 Continuity between Dao’an and Kumārajīva’s translation enterprises

Not only Dao’an created the necessary conditions for the success of Kumārajīva’s translation enterprise but also, having known about his presence in the Western Kingdoms, repeatedly exhorted the king Fu Jian to make arrangements for bringing him to Chang’an. Unfortunately, his wish to discuss obscure passages of the scripture and doctrinal issues with the Kuchean master was to remain unfulfilled, as it was only sixteen years after Dao’an’s death that Kumārajīva entered Chang’an<sup>163</sup>. These two great figures that more than anyone else contributed to lead Chinese Buddhism into a new era never met each other; even so, after the disorders following the fall of the Former Qin many of Dao’an’s collaborators returned to Chang’an and joined Kumārajīva’s translation team providing him with invaluable help, know-how and experience. Among them we find the following monks (note that the biographical information provided below - which is based on *Chu sanzang jiji* and *Gaoseng zhuan* - aims primarily at proving the monks’ participation first in Dao’an’s translation activities and later on in Kumārajīva’s ones).

#### a. Fahe 法和 (fl. 349 - 402)

In his youth he was Dao’an’s fellow student under the guidance of Fotucheng 佛圖澄 in Ye 鄴 (Southern Hebei). In order to escape from the Disorders of the Shi Clan 石氏之亂 (a bloody struggle for power started with the death of Shi Hu in 349) he first moved with Dao’an to Huoze 獲澤 and then proceeded on his own to Sichuan (*Shu* 蜀) at the head of a group of disciples, being the first to preach the dharma in that region. He later rejoined Dao’an in Chang’an and helped him to “carefully check [the text] and decide [the final version of] the newly translated sūtras, examining and correcting their meaning”<sup>164</sup>; among these scriptures are the

<sup>161</sup> Namely, the *Middle Treatise* 中論 [T 1564], the *Hundred Verses Treatise* 百論 [T 1569] and the *Treatise in the twelve doctrinal positions* 十二門論 [T 1568], plus the imposing *Great Commentary on the Larger Prajñāpāramitā* 大智度論 [T1509]

<sup>162</sup> «New Preface to the Buddhist Conquest of China», in Zürcher 2013, p. 447

<sup>163</sup> Kumārajīva arrived in Chang’an towards the end of 401 CE at the age of 58 (here I follow the date stated by Tang Yongtong - see Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 218 and p. 226 -; Pelliot says instead that the Kuchean monk arrived at the beginning of 402 - see Pelliot 2000, p. 3 -)

<sup>164</sup> 「與安公詳定新經，參正文義。」 (Fahe’s biography, in *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 5, p. 354, a25-26)

*Ekottarikāgama* 增壹阿含經<sup>165</sup>, the *Sengjialuocha suo ji jing* 僧伽羅刹所集經<sup>166</sup> and the *Zun Poxumi pusa suo ji lun* 尊婆須蜜菩薩所集論<sup>167</sup>. Around 387, during the disorders following the fall of the Former Qin 前秦, he escaped to Luoyang, where he helped Saṃghadeva undertake a revision of the texts produced in Chang'an<sup>168</sup>. Then the monk went back again to Chang'an on the invitation of a member of the new ruling clan Yao 姚, the Duke of Jin 晉公 Yao Xu 姚緒 (fl. 384 - 406), commander of the Qin garrison at Pufan 蒲阪, on the eastern entrance of Guanzhong<sup>169</sup>. Apparently, he had the chance to meet Kumārajīva; and the Kuchean master must have kept him in high regard since, as we are informed by the sources, he once presented him with a laudatory poem<sup>170</sup>. By the time of Kumārajīva's arrival in Chang'an Fahe was in his late 70's.

## b. Sengrui 僧叡 (ca. 352 - 436)

He became a monk at the age of 18 and followed Sengxian 僧賢 as his master. When 24, he travelled through the many renown areas [of the country] (*mingbang* 名邦) preaching the dharma and gaining a great fame; it must have been during this period that he met Dao'an and came to assist him in the translation work. According to the sources, he acted as scribe during the translation of the aforementioned *Si ahanmu chao jie* 四阿含暮抄解 (*Commentary on a Compendium of the Four Āgamas*) undertaken in late 382<sup>171</sup>.

When Kumārajīva arrived in Chang'an (by that time he had already passed his 50s<sup>172</sup>) he joined him in the translation work, soon becoming one of his closest collaborators<sup>173</sup> (in some later sources he is referred to as one of the master's "Four Great Disciples" - *si da dizi* 四大弟子 -)<sup>174</sup>. He worked as scribe during the translation of many fundamental Buddhist scriptures and wrote important prefaces to many of those works (for ex. the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā*, the *Lotus Sūtra* and *Da Zhidu lun*). His expertise in translation and exegesis was acknowledged and praised by Kumārajīva who liked to discuss with him issues related to the rendering of Sanskrit expression into literary Chinese and to the doctrinal subtleties found in the sūtras<sup>175</sup>.

Sengrui was kept in high regard also by the ruler and Buddhist patron Yao Xing 姚興 and his younger brother Yao Song 姚嵩 who greatly praised him for the elegance of his demeanor and the refinedness of his eloquence<sup>176</sup>.

<sup>165</sup> Cf. *Zeng yi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經 [T125], vol. 1, p. 549, a17-18

<sup>166</sup> Cf. *Sengjialuocha suo ji jing* 僧伽羅刹所集經 [T194], vol. 1, p. 115, c5-6

<sup>167</sup> Cf. *Zun Poxumi pusa suo ji lun* 尊婆須蜜菩薩所集論 [T1549], vol. 1, p. 721, a29-b1

<sup>168</sup> Cf. *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 13, p. 99, c11-14. On Fahe's movements after leaving Dao'an's translation group in Chang'an see Palumbo 2013, pp. 64 - 66

<sup>169</sup> Cf. *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 5, p. 354, a26

<sup>170</sup> Cf. *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 2, p. 332, b29-c3

<sup>171</sup> Cf. the anonymous preface to the *Commentary on a Compendium of the Four Āgamas* (*Si ahanmu chao jie* 四阿含暮抄解 [T1505], vol. 1, p. 1, a14-16); see also Sengyou's record on the production of the same scripture - which is here called *Compendium of the Four Āgamas* (*Si ahanmu chao jing* 四阿含暮抄經) (*Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 2, p. 10, b13)

<sup>172</sup> Cf. 予既知命遇此真化 (*Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 8, p. 53, a28-p. 52, c28)

<sup>173</sup> Cf. 「沙門僧叡才識高朗，常隨什傳寫。」 (*Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 14, p. 101, c7)

<sup>174</sup> Cf. for ex. Zhanran's 湛然 words 「“關中四子”即生、肇、融、叡，後人承用“四子”之義」《法華玄義疏》卷3 (CBETA, T33, no. 1717, p. 837, b1-2); see also the Song monk Zhiyuan 智圓: 「什公門下有十哲、八俊、四聖。肇皆預焉。生、肇、融、叡為四聖。」《涅槃玄義發源機要》卷2 (CBETA, T38, no. 1766, p. 23, b6-7)

<sup>175</sup> Cf. for ex. *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 14, p. 101, c7-13 and *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 6, p. 364, b2-6

<sup>176</sup> Cf. *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], p. 364, a25-b2

### c. Senglüe 僧翬

He became a monk and resided with his master Hongjue 弘覺 in the Great Temple 大寺 of Chang'an. He is said to have mastered the Six Classics as well as the Three Sections of Buddhist Scriptures (*san zang* 三藏). We know from Dao'an's *Preface to the Ekottarikāgama* that in 384 the monk, together with Sengmao 僧茂, helped checking the text of the *Ekottarikāgama* 增壹阿含經<sup>177</sup> and correcting its mistakes.

By the time of Kumārajīva's arrival he was roughly 60 and was one of the "old monks of the Chang'an's community" (*Guanzhong jiuseng* 關中舊僧) whose opinion was particularly authoritative when settling the internal disputes of the saṃgha (see for example the sordid affair that led to the expulsion of Buddhahadra). Highly respected by the rulers Yao Chang 姚萇 and Yao Xing 姚興, Senglüe was appointed by the latter "clerical moderator" (*sengzhu* 僧主, *sengzheng* 僧正)<sup>178</sup>, a position that he covered for the first time in history, and then became institutional in the administrative organization of the state-supported Buddhist community.

### d. Zhu Fonian 竺佛念

As it has been said above, he was the most important interpreter in Dao'an's translation enterprise. After the death of Dao'an (happened in June or July 385<sup>179</sup>) and the end of Fu Jian's regime he remained in Guanzhong and gained the patronage of the Later Qin ruling clan Yao<sup>180</sup>.

He must have lived up to get to see Kumārajīva since according to the sources he acted as interpreter during the translation of the *Dīrgha Āgama* 長阿含經 which was concluded in 413 AD<sup>181</sup>; this scripture was issued by Buddhayaśas 佛陀耶舍 (a former master of Kumārajīva who arrived in Chang'an in 408). Even so, Tang Yongtong poses the question of whether the monk mentioned in Sengzhao's preface to this text really corresponds to Zhu Fonian<sup>182</sup>.

### e. Tanying 曇影 (aka Tanjing 曇景)

He specialized in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Prajñāpāramitā* and his lectures on these texts were attended by large crowds<sup>183</sup>. He assisted Dao'an in the translation of the *Vinaya* scriptures and later joined Kumārajīva and helped him in the translation work<sup>184</sup>. He wrote commentaries to the *Lotus Sūtra* (the *Fahua yishu* 法華義疏) and to the *Middle Treatise* (the *Zhu Zhonglun* 注中論), and corrected the Chinese version of the *Sādhyaśiddhiśāstra* 成實論<sup>185</sup>. By the time of Kumārajīva's arrival in Chang'an he was roughly 50.

### f. Sengdao 僧叡

He became a monk at the age of 10 and as a young novice was greatly praised by Sengrui 僧叡. He certainly worked in the translation *equipe* directed by Dao'an since we know from the

<sup>177</sup> Cf. *Zeng yi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經 [T125], vol. 1, p. 549, a17-18. The text was issued by Dharmanandin 曇摩難提 and translated by Zhu Fonian 竺佛念.

<sup>178</sup> As pointed out in Senglüe's biography: "the institution of the 'clerical moderator' [in China] started with Senglüe 「僧正之興，翬之始也」 (*Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 6, p. 363, b18). Cf. also *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 6, p. 363, b10-13.

<sup>179</sup> For a discussion of the date of Dao'an's death see Palumbo 2013, pp. 49 - 58

<sup>180</sup> On the movements of Zhu Fonian after the dissolution of Dao'an translation *equipe* see Palumbo 2013, p. 65, in which *inter alia* it is stated that "Zhu Fonian [...] was still in Chang'an, and close to the Yao Qin court, in 399".

<sup>181</sup> Cf. Sengzhao's preface to the text (*Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經 [T1], vol. 1, p. 1, a23-b6). See also *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 13, p. 99, b11-27, *Ibidem*, vol. 14, p. 102, c9-15, and *Ibidem*, vol. 2, p. 11, b5-7.

<sup>182</sup> "佛念（助佛陀耶舍譯《長阿含》者，序稱為涼州沙門，豈即安公之竺佛念耶？）" (Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 222)

<sup>183</sup> Cf. *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 6, p. 364, a3-4

<sup>184</sup> Cf. *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 6, p. 364, a5-6

<sup>185</sup> Cf. *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 11, p. 78, a12

sources that in the year 382 together with Tanjiu 曇究 and Sengrui he acted as scribe for the translation of the *Commentary on a Compendium of the Four Āgamas* 四阿含暮抄經<sup>186</sup>. When Kumārajīva arrived in Chang'an he was roughly 37; he soon became one of the foreign master's trusted assistants in charge of revising and fixating the meaning of the newly translated *sūtras* and *śāstras*<sup>187</sup>. He specialized in the study of the *Satyasiddhiśāstra* 成實論 and greatly contributed to spread its doctrines becoming an important forerunner of the Chinese *Satyasiddhi Sect* 成實學派.

### g. Huijing 慧精 (aka Tanjie 曇戒)

He was originally a student of Dao'an and resided with him in the Taihou Monastery 太后寺 of Chang'an<sup>188</sup>. After Kumārajīva's arrival, we find him mentioned in Sengrui's *Preface to the Larger Prajñāpāramitā* 大品經序 as one of the exegete-monks who "carefully examined the meaning and checked the text before writing it down"; that was the first redaction of the text, which took place in 403<sup>189</sup>.

## 3.2 Innovations in Kumārajīva's translation enterprise

After the collapse of Fu Jian's regime, the power was taken by Yao Chang 姚萇, who ruled from 384 to 394. Little is known about his attitude toward Buddhism; however, as part of a consolidated tradition in the city, Buddhist activities like translation were probably at least tolerated. An openly pro-Buddhist position was instead taken by his son Yao Xing 姚興 who succeeded to the throne in 394. A fervent Buddhist himself, he sponsored the huge translation project directed by Kumārajīva.

Even though - as we have seen - this translation enterprise inherited procedures and know-how from the previous era, a number of important innovations were made which I briefly point out below<sup>190</sup>.

### 3.2.1 State sponsorship

During Kumārajīva's era mentions to the donors (*tanyue* 檀越, *quanzhu zhe* 勸助者) completely disappear from the sources. In fact, Yao Xing completely financed the Buddhist activities of the community gathered around Kumārajīva: he hosted in state sponsored monasteries a large number of monks<sup>191</sup> and actively promoted the translation activity, often even taking part in person to the translation or revision of certain scriptures. Also, the orders to "issue" a certain sūtra often came directly from the king himself or from a high-rank state official member of the Yao clan.<sup>192</sup>

An investigation of the reasons why Yao Xing (as other non-Chinese rulers who established states in Norther China during the Medieval times) had become a supporter of Buddhism making it almost a "state religion" might help us better explain his decision of sponsoring such large-scale translation projects. However, unfortunately such reasons are not easy to investigate in full, and only some general motives can be outlined here. *First* of all, we might suppose that representing non-Chinese ethnic groups (the Yao 姚 clan was of Qiang 羌 ethnicity, whereas the Fu 苻 clan was of Di 氐 ethnicity, both being proto-Tibetan tribes originally settled in North-

<sup>186</sup> Cf. *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 9, p. 64, c13-4)

<sup>187</sup> See *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 7, p. 371, a17-29

<sup>188</sup> Cf. *Ming seng zhuan chao* 名僧傳抄 [X1523], vol. 1, p. 346, a19 // Z 2B:7, p. 1, a16 // R134, p. 1, a16

<sup>189</sup> Cf. *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 8, p. 53, b7-10)

<sup>190</sup> On this important topic see Wang Wenyan 1984 (particularly pp. 218 - 235), Cao Shibang 1992, Xiao Shichang 2010 (pp. 181 - 252) and Zacchetti 1996 (particularly pp. 365 - 369)

<sup>191</sup> We read for example in Buddhahadra's biography that "the Qin sovereign Yao Xing focused on the [study of] Buddhist dharma, [and] supported more than three thousand monks" 「秦主姚興專志佛法，供養三千餘僧」 (Buddhabhadra's biography, in *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 2, p. 334, b27)

<sup>192</sup> For a discussion of Yao Xing's religious policy see LI Gang 2010, pp. 216 - 219



West China) the ruling elites preferred to support a foreign and “universalistic” religion rather than the native Chinese cults. Even so, it has to be noted that the Later Qin state was highly confucianized and Yao Xing greatly valued the Confucian teachings; as a matter of fact, under his reign venerated Confucian masters like Jiang Kan 姜龕, Chun Yuqi 淳于岐 and Guo Gao 郭高 lectured in Chang’an, each of them having hundreds of disciples and attracting even larger numbers of students from afar. In his free time the king often invited those masters to the Eastern Hall (*Dong tang* 東堂) for “discussing with them the Arts of the Tao and comprehensively analyzing Names and Principles”<sup>193</sup>. There is also evidence that notwithstanding the times of war and chaos Yao Xing actively promoted intellectual exchange; for instance, the Confucian master “Hu Bian 胡辯 from Liangzhou (the present day Wuwei 武威 in Gansu Province) by the end of Fu Jian’s regime had moved East to Luoyang (a city that had not yet been subdued by the Later Qin) and taught more than one thousand disciples. [So famous he was that] many men of shallow learning from the Guanzhong region went to him in order to pose question on various scholarly matters”. [So Yao] Xing ordered the Chief Commandant of the Pass: ‘The usual restrictions are not to be applied to the students moving in and out [the borders] for inquiring about the Arts of the Tao and for training and perfecting themselves’. Hence all those who pursued learning studied with great commitment and Confucianism greatly flourished”<sup>194</sup>. **Second**, to support - even to the point of personally participating - Buddhist activities and in particular translation (which is *dharma* - *i.e.* offering of the knowledge of the dharma to the sentient beings - *par excellence*) allowed the ruler to gain personal merits and, in political terms, granted a sort of “blessing and protection” to the ruling clan. **Third**, to host at court foreign monks and eminent Chinese Buddhist *literati* was a source of great prestige for the ruler. As we have seen, this was the case of Dao’an under Fu Jian’s rule, and no doubt was also the case of Kumārajīva and other renowned foreign or local monks gathered around the Later Qin court. **Fourth**, in a time of war and devastation when commoners were continuously exposed to violence and life threats, the Buddhist religion could have served to “soften and subdue men’s hearts”<sup>195</sup>. To give some relieve to the people and grant them some basic protection was a key concern for Yao Xing who no doubt wanted to promote population growth and restore the economic production. Hence, along with his religious policy - and much in tune with it - he adopted measures for alleviating the harsh life conditions of his subjects, to contain violence and reduce the abuses of power: he ordered that “all the commoners who had sold themselves as servants because of starvation be freed and have their free status back”<sup>196</sup>, and “established the law teaching in Chang’an”<sup>197</sup> so that the local officers without position could come study it, then go back and settle disputes as magistrates. **Finally**, being usually learned and well trained *literati*, foreign and Chinese monks

<sup>193</sup> “講論道藝，錯綜名理” (*Jin shu* 晉書, *Yao Xing zaiji* 姚興載記). On Yao Xing’s favor and support to Confucian activities see Wang Zhongluo 2016, p. 279 and Yang Zhirong 2012, pp. 20 - 24

<sup>194</sup> “涼州胡辯，符堅之末，東徙洛陽，講授弟子千有餘人。關中後進多赴之請業，興敕關尉曰：‘諸生諮訪道藝，修己厲身，往來出入，勿拘常限。於是學者咸勸，儒風盛焉，’ ” (*Jin shu* 晉書, *Yao Xing zaiji* 姚興載記)

<sup>195</sup> See *Guang Hongming ji* 廣弘明集 [T2103] (*Expanded Collection on the Propagation of the Light*): “during the Shi, Fu and Yao eras the sūtra translation activity greatly developed. This aimed at softening and subduing men’s hearts” 「石、符、姚世，經譯遂廣。蓋欲柔伏人心。」 (Op. cit., *Qi shu shu Fo zhi* 齊書述佛志, vol. 2, p. 106, b29-c1). Cf. also the following passage from Kumārajīva’s biography in *Gaoseng zhuan* p. 332, b8-9: “[Yao]xing thought that the Buddhist Path was profound and its practices were all good. He believed it represented a good ford leading [all beings] out of [their] pain[ful existence] and [that it constituted] a great rule for governing the world” 「興以佛道冲邃，其行唯善。信為出苦之良津，御世之洪則。」

As the sources relate, under Yao Xing’s rule Buddhism was very widespread in the kingdom, not only among the members of the ruling clan but also among the population; see for ex. 「王公已下並欽贊 (read with variant 讚) 厥風。」 (*Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 2, p. 332, b10-11) and “公卿以下，莫不欽附沙門，自遠而至者五千餘人” (*Jin shu* 晉書, *Yao Xing zaiji* 姚興載記).

<sup>196</sup> “百姓因荒自買為奴婢者，悉免為良人” (*Jin shu* 晉書, *Yao Xing zaiji* 姚興載記)

<sup>197</sup> “立律學於長安” (*Jin shu* 晉書, *Yao Xing zaiji* 姚興載記)

were often consulted by the king on political matters and sometimes even used as state advisors. This was clearly the case of Dao'an, who besides his religious activity had become one of Fu Jian's trusted advisors in political matters<sup>198</sup>, and such practice was maintained under Yao Xing's rule; in fact, as we know from the sources, Yao Xing was eager to spot among the clergy "practical talents" that he could employ in the administration of the state. In the collection *Hong ming ji* 弘明集 [T2102] some epistles are preserved in which the king, considering that "the monks Daoheng 道恒 and Daobiao 道標 were endowed with outstanding intelligence and had a talent for managing the state affairs"<sup>199</sup>, repeatedly asks Kumārajīva that they undress the monastic robe and serve him as state officials<sup>200</sup>.

### 3.2.2 Large assemblies attending the translation

During Kumārajīva's era, for the first time the sources report the numbers of monks and laymen attending the translation activity, those being usually counted by the thousands. The presence of such large assemblies is directly related to the huge growth of the Buddhist community in Chang'an promoted by the ruling clan and to the presence at court of such a great translator and scholar as Kumārajīva whose command of the Chinese language allowed for the delivery of a thorough and articulated explanation of the Buddhist texts that were being translated, thus turning the actual translation activity into a proper Buddhist lecture. During such expositions of the dharma the sūtra text often became a starting point for detours into Buddhist history, hagiography, doctrinal matters, linguistic differences between Sanskrit and Chinese, Indian traditions and lore etc. As we can see, in this age the scanty glosses recording Kumārabuddhi's explanations - which I have discussed above - have already developed into a consistent and articulated body of oral exegesis.

Not much is known about the actual composition of those crowds attending the lectures. However, these must have been very variegated including noblemen of the ruling clan, state-sponsored monks residing in the official temples, but also independent śramanas coming to the city for the sake of personal spiritual cultivation; this is the case, for example, of a certain "śramana Huishi 惠始 from the Qinghe county (in today's Hebei Province) whose secular surname was Zhang 張. Having heard that Kumārajīva was issuing the scriptures he went to Chang'an to see him and practiced meditation north of the White Ditch; during the day he entered the city and listened to the [master's] preaching, at night he went back and sat quietly [in meditation]. All the learned people of the three administrative districts of Chang'an held him in high regard".<sup>201</sup>

### 3.2.3 Translation and exegesis

In this new age the oral commentary given by the foreign master served to bridge the cultural gap and allow the Chinese to deal with the "stranger-ness" of the Buddhist texts. If during Dao'an's age the questions asked by the interpreter to the issuer were but one of the means for clarifying obscure points of the text, with Kumārajīva the role of exegesis became instead central, to the point that the translation ground turned into a lecture hall attended by monks and laymen who had for the first time the chance to get instructed on countless doctrinal, exegetical and cultural matters related to the foreign religion and to directly question the foreign master on words and expressions used in the text.

<sup>198</sup> On this aspect see Zürcher 2007, p. 201

<sup>199</sup> 「恒、標二人神氣俊朗，有經國之量」 (*Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 6, p. 364, c4-5)

<sup>200</sup> See *Hong ming ji* 弘明集 [T2102], vol. 11, p. 73 and Daoheng's 道恒 biography in *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], vol. 6, p. 364, b23-p. 365, a8

<sup>201</sup> 「沙門惠始。本張氏。清河人。聞羅什出經。詣長安見之，觀習禪定於白渠北。晝則入城聽講，夕還處靜。三輔有識者多宗之。」 (*Guang Hongming ji* 廣弘明集 [T2103], vol. 2, p. 102, a12-17). Even though the biography of this monk is filled with miraculous events there is a chance that the information here mentioned is based on true facts.

As we know from the sources, during those lectures a debate was held on the text in order to clarify its meaning and make its Chinese rendering as correct as possible. This debate was not restricted to a small number of specialized operators, but was open to the whole assembly whose members could intervene raising doubts and posing questions. Given these premises, as Zacchetti sharply pointed out<sup>202</sup>, the huge numbers of the participants mentioned in the sources acquire a new significance in that they account for the meticulousness with which the text was investigated and hence the accuracy of the translation produced.<sup>203</sup>

The contemporaneity and - we might even say - coincidence of exegesis/lectures and translation is no doubt a fundamental feature of the Buddhist translation activity during Kumārajīva's times. The oral exegesis delivered by the master and sometimes even parts of the question-and-answer debate with the audience were noted down by monks, and those written materials constituted the basis for the compositions of commentaries on the scripture. How these annotations were collected, re-elaborated and rearranged into written commentaries is a very complicated matter on which the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* can perhaps shed some light.

#### 4. The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* [T1775] as a product of Kumārajīva's translation enterprise

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* 注維摩詰經 [T1775] preserved under Sengzhao's name is a typical product of Kumārajīva's translation enterprise and we can find in it all the above mentioned socio-historical and cultural forces at work. In turn, a careful analysis of this composite and multilayered document can add more details to the general picture that has been sketched above from a genealogical perspective.

In investigating this text we can profit from the fact of being particularly well informed about its genesis, the circumstances and the process of its composition. In fact, besides the text itself we also possess the following related materials, which I will use in the present exposition:

1 – The *Preface to the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* 注維摩詰經序 by Sengzhao 僧肇 (a useful ancient exegesis of this text is found in two texts from Dunhuang, namely the *Weimo shu shi qian xiaoxu chao* 維摩疏釋前小序抄 [T2775] and the *Shi Zhao xu* 釋肇序 [T 2776]<sup>204</sup> containing annotations jotted down by the Tang monk Tiqing 體請 of the Chongfu Monastery 崇福寺 while attending a lecture at the Zisheng Monastery 資聖寺 of Chang'an in the spring of 767);

2 – The *Preface to the Expository Commentary on the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* 毘摩羅詰經義疏序 by Sengrui (the text of Sengrui's commentary is lost. Only few entries have been preserved in two commentaries on the same sūtra written by Daoye 道液 (mid-Tang dynasty) which have also been found in the Dunhuang 敦煌 caves, namely the *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經

<sup>202</sup> Zacchetti 1996, pp. 368-369

<sup>203</sup> It is interesting to observe how the large crowds of Bodhisattvas, heavenly beings, monks and laymen attending the Buddha's preaching usually mentioned in the overture of the sūtras were also traditionally held to account for the reliability of the sūtra text itself as it was transmitted by its collectors; the information about the time and place where a certain exposition of the dharma had taken place also served for this purpose. This is, for example, explicitly pointed out by Daoye in his *Jingming jing Guanzhong shichao* 淨名經關中釋抄: "since the deluded people are suspicious, the collectors of the sūtra mention [in the introduction] the time, the place, the lord of conversion (i.e. the preacher of the sūtra) and the audience. Such circumstances having been clarified, also the absence of mistakes in the transmission [of the scripture] is assured, letting the listeners be sure on those basis that [the words] are not false 「[...] 惑者多疑故, 集經者引時及處、化主、同聞, 既事跡炳然, 兼翻傳不謬。則令聽者因事證事 (read with variant 一) 證之不虛。[...]」 (Jingming jing Guanzhong shi chao 淨名經關中釋抄 [T2778], vol. 1, p. 511, c7-11)

<sup>204</sup> It can be stated beyond doubt that the two texts from Dunhuang T2775 and T2776 are actually part 1 and part 2 of the same document. Due to the corruption of the manuscript there is a short missing section between the last part of the former and the first part of the latter.

集解關中疏 [T 2777] - completed in 760, then further revised and published in its final edition in 765 - (17 entries) and *Jingming jing Guanzhong shichao* 淨名經關中釋抄 [T 2778] (2 entries)<sup>205</sup>;

3 – Kumārajīva’s translated version of the sūtra, namely the *Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經 [T475] dating 406 AD, along with an earlier version produced by Zhi Qian 支謙 (*Fo shuo Weimojie jing* 佛說維摩詰經 [T474]) and a later one made by Xuanzang (*Shuo Wugoucheng jing shu* 說無垢稱經疏 [T1782]).

#### 4.1 Later Qin patronage

From Sengzhao’s preface to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* we know some interesting details about the circumstances in which this sūtra was translated:

「大秦天王俊神超世，玄心獨悟。弘至治於萬機之上，揚道化於千載之下。每尋翫茲典，以為棲神之宅。而恨支、竺所出理滯於文，常恐玄宗墜於譯人。北天之運，運通有在也。以弘始八年歲次鶉火一命大將軍常山公，右將軍安成侯與義學沙門千二百人於長安大寺，請羅什法師重譯正本」《注維摩詰經》卷 1 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 327, b5-12)

The Heavenly King<sup>206</sup> of the Great Qin is outstanding for his extremely talented mind, and his profound intellect has allowed him to gain a unique understanding [of the Buddhist doctrine]. He extends his excellent administration over all kinds of state affairs and promotes [through his deeds] the guidance and conversion [of the beings] down to the next thousand years. Each time he read this sūtra (i.e. the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*), he considered it a refuge where his spirit could peacefully rest; and he complained the fact that in the translations produced by Zhi [Qian] and Zhu [Fahu] (Dharmarakṣa)<sup>207</sup> the principles [of the doctrine] were hindered by the words, and he constantly worried that the profound tenet [of the doctrine] got stuck in the translator[’s brush].

[The Buddha predicted that after his parinirvāṇa the Prajñāpāramitā teachings would spread southwards, then westwards, and finally reach] Northern India [and the eastern countries] and greatly flourish; hence the vitality of Buddhism in this region is not without reasons [: it was Kumārajīva who fulfilled that prophecy with his arrival].

In the eight year of the Hongshi 弘始 era (406 AD), at the beginning of June, [the king] ordered [that] Marshal [Yao Xian 姚顯] Duke of Changshan 常山 and the General of the Right [Yao Song 姚嵩] Marquis of Ancheng 安成 along with one thousand two hundred monks expert in exegesis [gather] at the Large Temple of Chang’an, and asked the dharma master Kumārajīva to retranslate the original text.

<sup>205</sup> See more on Daoye’s works and Ti Qing’s annotations in Chapt. 3 of this work at the section “The *Jingming jing Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 [T2777] by Daoye 道液 and related documents”.

<sup>206</sup> On the different hypotheses on the origins of the title “Heavenly King” (which could be related to the Chinese ancient tradition, to the tribal organization of the ethnic groups from the North-West, or even to the Buddhist tradition) and its adoption by many non-Chinese rulers of Northern China during the Medieval times see Wu Fangjia 2013 and Wu Honglin 2013.

<sup>207</sup> Tiqing 體請 explains that “Zhi stands for Zhi Qian and Zhu stands for Zhu Fahu” 「支譯支謙，竺謂法護也。」 (Shi Zhao xu 釋肇序 T2776, vol. 1, p. 438, c6-7). Indeed, the ethnicon Zhu 竺 (the Indian) might well refer to Zhu Fahu 竺法護 (Dharmarakṣa) who translated the sūtra under the Western Jin with the title of *Weimojie suo shuo famen jing* 維摩詰所說法門經 (in 1 scroll); however, it could also refer to Zhu Shulan whose translation dates to the same period and has for title *Yi Pimoluojie jing* 異毘摩羅詰經 (in 3 scrolls). As noted above, Dharmarakṣa’s and Zhu Shulan’s versions along with Zhi Qian’s one constituted the three texts on which basis Zhi Mindu had composed his synoptic edition of the sūtra (cf. *He Weimojie jing xu* 合維摩詰經序, in T2145, p. 58, b21-c10). The fact that Zhu Shulan did produce a Chinese version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is apparently not questioned by Zürcher (cf. “Zhu Shulan made a translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and probably also a new version of the *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra*.” (Zürcher 2007, p. 78))

From this passage we know that the translation of this scripture took place under the auspices of the royal family: it was the king Yao Xing 姚興 in person who invited Kumārajīva to undertake the translation because not satisfied with the previous versions, and two of the ruler's younger brothers and high rank state-officials Yao Xian 姚顯 and Yao Song 姚嵩 also attended the translation together with a large number of monks expert in exegesis. As it has been observed by Zürcher, the personal involvement of the ruling clan in the Buddhist activities constitutes a typical feature of Northern Buddhism and has to be related to the authoritarian and even despotic personal leadership which was part of the still strong tribal background of the non-Chinese ethnic groups ruling over Northern China; this contrasted with the more diffuse patronage of the Southern faction leaders under the Jin Chinese rule.<sup>208</sup>

In the above quote we also find the rather mysterious expression “*beitian zhi yun*” 北天之運. Even though some modern scholars have intended *beitian* 北天 as “Northern China”<sup>209</sup> in order to make sense of the passage, practically all the ancient commentators<sup>210</sup> understood it - as it is the case - as “Northern India” and associated the passage to a well-known ancient prophecy regarding the transmission of the *Prajñāpāramitā* according to which after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa the *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings would spread southwards, then westwards, and finally reach Northern India and greatly flourish<sup>211</sup>. Even though China does not play any role in the prediction, the Chinese clerics seem to have “bent” it in such a way that it could include their own country. In explaining the passage, Tiqing first relates the prophecy and then produces a calculation by which “based on the [years] count, [the *Prajñāpāramitā*] will [spread] in the South for 500 years, then in the West for 500 years and finally [be transmitted] to the North. Now, this country (i.e. China) is at the Eastern side of Northern India. After a thousand years [from the Buddha's parinirvāṇa] the Great Teachings are transmitted to this country [by Kumārajīva], as the Buddha had foretold”.<sup>212</sup> Tiqing's interpretation of the expression is likely to be correct, also considering the fact that in the preface the passage in question is used both as a praise to the king and as a recognition of the providential arrival of Kumārajīva in Chang'an.<sup>213</sup>

<sup>208</sup> See on this «Tidings from the South: Chinese Court Buddhism and Overseas Relations in the Fifth Century CE», in Zürcher 2013, p. 589. On this topic see also Xiao Shichang 2010, pp. 223 - 248

<sup>209</sup> For example Zhang Chunbo 2010, p. 65 and Patrick Carr é (Carr é 2013)

<sup>210</sup> See for example Tiqing's 體請 *Shi Zhao xu* 釋肇序 [T2776], vol. 1, p. 438, b5-c21 and Daoye's 道液 *Jingming jing* 淨名經關中釋抄 [T2778], vol. 1, p. 509, b12-16

<sup>211</sup> See for example the following passages from the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts: 「如是，舍利弗！怛薩阿竭去後，是般若波羅蜜當在南天竺。其有學已，從南天竺當轉至西天竺。其有學已，當從西天竺轉至到北天竺。其有學者當學之。」 (*Daoxing bore jing* 道行般若經 [T224], vol. 4, p. 446, a28-b3); 「爾時，舍利子白佛言：「世尊！甚深般若波羅蜜多，佛滅度後何方興盛？佛言：「舍利子！甚深般若波羅蜜多，我滅度後至東南方當漸興盛。 [...] 我滅度後從東南方轉至南方漸當興盛。 [...] 我滅度後復從南方至西南方當漸興盛。 [...] 我滅度後從西南方至西北方當漸興盛。 [...] 我滅度後從西北方轉至北方當漸興盛。我滅度後復從北方至東北方當漸興盛。 [...] 我滅度已，後時、後分、後五百歲，甚深般若波羅蜜多於東北方大作佛事。」 (*Da boreboluomi jing* 大般若波羅蜜多經 [T220], vol. 302, p. 538, b13-p. 539, b1). See also Conze 1978, p. 2

<sup>212</sup> 「據運數，南天五百年，西天五百年，方至北天。此國即北天焉 (read as 竺) 國之東隅，故千年之後，大教合傳於此國，果佛言」 (*Shi Zhao xu* 釋肇序 [T2776], vol. 1, p. 438, c19-21)

<sup>213</sup> An almost identical expression is used by Sengzhao at the beginning of his famous treatise *Prajñā has no Knowledge* 般若無知 in which the monk starts by introducing the *Prajñāpāramitā* teaching, then traces a short biographical sketch of Kumārajīva and remembers how the king Yao Xing had conquered Kucha and brought him to Chang'an, and finally relates the prophecy: “the spread of the dharma in Northern India [and the Eastern Countries], if we count [the years] is like [the Buddha had predicted]” 北天之運，數其然也”。 This passage is explained as follows by Jizang 吉藏 in *Shi'er men lun shu* 十二門論疏 T1825: 「《大品》云：“是般若從南方轉至北方”。肇云：“北天之運，數其然也。”即釋後代幸遇之所由也。」 (vol. 1, p. 174, a22-24); see also the *Zhaolun xin shu* 肇論新疏 [T1860] by Wencai 文才 (Yuan dynasty): 「北天之運，數其然矣 《大品》云：“般若於佛滅後先至南方，次至西方，次至北方大盛。震旦在天竺東北，今什公道通，應斯懸記。」 (vol. 2, p. 213, b26-28)

Through this intricate and arduous adaptation, Kumārajīva's arrival in Chang'an and the great revival of the Prajñāpāramitā studies he brought about could be seen as the actualization of a "sacred plan" which was foretold by the Buddha himself. Being so, we can imagine how the royal family who was responsible for the conquest of Kucha - where the Buddhist master was kept prisoner by Lü Guang 呂光 - and his transfer to the Later Qin capital, came to play a role of extraordinary importance in the great picture of the Buddhist sacred history that had been sketched out<sup>214</sup>.

#### 4.2 The translation process and the revision

As to the translation process through which the Chinese version of the sūtra was produced, Sengzhao's preface again provides us with useful first-hand information:

「什以高世之量<sup>215</sup>，冥心真境。既盡環中，又善方言。時手執胡文，口自宣譯，道俗虔虔，一言三復。陶冶精求，務存聖意。其文約而詣，其旨婉而彰。微遠之言於茲顯然。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 58, b14-17)

Kumārajīva, endowed with outstanding talent, the mind deeply merged with the ultimate truth, not only deeply understood the [import of] "emptiness" but was also well-versed in the Chinese language. At that time, holding in his hand the Sanskrit text he translated it orally by himself; the deferent monks and laymen [that were attending] examined [the meaning of] each word for three times [before the translation being written down]. It was only through a painstaking polishing process that the final text was shaped, for [the great master aimed at] conscientiously preserving the holy message. [Kumārajīva's] literary style was concise and direct, the meaning [expressed] was in tune with [the principles of the doctrine] and fully clear. The subtle and profound words [of this sūtra] were finally fully disclosed [in his translation]!

In the above quote Sengzhao describes Kumārajīva as being endowed with two important skills: he understood the doctrinal meaning of the text (*jīn huanzhong* 盡環中) and was proficient enough in the Chinese language for personally translating its letter and explaining it (*shan fangyan* 善方言). The simultaneous mastery of these two expertises by one man was somehow unprecedented in Chinese Buddhist history where often those who knew the doctrine couldn't translate and those who could translate were not competent in exegesis.

After Kumārajīva had read a passage and explained it orally by himself, his words were carefully examined and evaluated. The expression "[to examine] each word for three times" (*yi yan san fu* 一言三復) is explained by Tiqing as "repeatedly examine and ascertain the meaning" (*zai shending qi yi* 再審定其義); as it is known, the number three in classical Chinese often stands for "many" or "numerous", and so the expression accounts for the extreme accuracy with which the meaning of the words in the original text were discussed<sup>216</sup>. This thorough analysis and

<sup>214</sup> Other prophecies and auspicious signs related to Kumārajīva's arrival in China and his spreading of the Mahāyāna doctrines are found throughout the master's biography in *Gaoseng zhuan*. Cf. for example p. 330, a11; p. 330, a11-p. 331, b19; p. 332, a20-24.

<sup>215</sup> Cf. Tiqing's comment 「“以高世之量”等者。歎德也。即智量高遠出過於世故云也」《釋肇序》卷 1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2776, p. 439, a6-8)

<sup>216</sup> Tiqing believes that this practice of repeated examination is derived from the Confucian tradition; as he comments: "[...] This is why in the *Confucian Analects* it is said: 'Nan Rong often recited [the ode that mentioned] the white jade tablet, viz. *A flaw in the white jade tablet can still be polished out; a flaw in these words of mine can never be undone* [Book of Odes, Ode n. 256]. So up to nowadays when reading the *Odes* [every sentence] is repeated many times. Now [Sengzhao's preface] uses that expression to mean that the text explains the correct principle and [in doing so] uses precise criteria; if the meaning is understood then the goal of the Path can be achieved, if the meaning is misunderstood then all the [heterodox] views will arise. For this reason it is necessary to 'repeatedly examine [the meaning of the scriptures]'" 「[...]故《論語》“南客 (read as 容) 三復白珪”故云“白珪之點尚可磨，斯言之點不可為”。故讀《詩》至此皆三復也。今取彼言耳，謂文詮正理，用軌物。心得意則道果由成，失旨則諸見從起，故須“三復”也」(Shi Zhao xu 釋肇序 T2776, vol. 1, p. 439, a18-23).

discussion of the terms ideally derives from Dao'an's awareness of the misunderstandings derived from mistaken renderings which we have described above. Dao'an's former disciple Sengrui, who assisted Kumārajīva in the translation of this sūtra clearly states in his preface (as I will argue in the Chapt. 3 of this work, Sengrui's preface probably referred to a different translation of the same sūtra previously undertaken by Kumārajīva himself):

「既蒙究摩羅法師正玄文，摘幽指。始悟前譯之傷本、謬文之乖趣耳。至如“以不來相”為“辱來”，“不見相”為“相見”，“未緣法”為“始神”，“緣合法”為“止心”。諸如此比，無品不有，無章不爾。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 58, c25-29)

It was only after I met the dharma master Kumārajīva who corrected this profound text and grasped its deep meaning that I started to clearly notice the [numerous] mistakes of the former translations [of this scripture] and the incorrect [interpretation of its] meaning [caused] by those mistaken words [used in translation]. For example “[Mañjuśrī, you have come] with the characteristic of not coming” was translated as “I gladly receive your visit”; “[you see] with the characteristic of not seeing” was rendered as “[thus] we see each other”, “non-conditioned dharmas” as “original spirit”, “[to realize the fact that] dharmas arise from [causes and] conditions” as “to stop mental activity” and so on. Similar mistakes are found in every chapter and every paragraph.

Even though sometimes faulty and misleading, the previous Chinese versions of a certain sūtra whenever available were checked upon - as we know from the sources - by Kumārajīva during his translation work<sup>217</sup>. In this regard it must be noted that the Kuchean translator borrowed heavily from Zhi Qian 支謙's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*<sup>218</sup>, albeit smoothing the text and correcting many mistakes.

After the oral discussion of a certain Sanskrit term or expression was concluded, it was up to the scribe to write down the Chinese equivalent: pondering over the exegesis he had just heard, he had to find out the best rendition both in terms of accuracy and literary style. Being so, it is clear how the person we simply call “scribe” was actually charged with a duty of primary importance. It is precisely for this reason that the position was covered only by monks who were well acquainted with the translation practice, were experienced in exegesis and talented in the literary composition.

We may then wonder who was the monk acting as scribe during the translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. The most reliable early bibliographical source we possess (i.e. Sengyou's *Chu sanzang jiji*, first published in 515 and then revised by the author shortly before his death in

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Another possible interpretation for this expression could be: “every sentence could be repeated many times [without finding out a single mistake]”.

<sup>217</sup> See for example the following famous passage from Sengrui's biography in *Gaoseng zhuan*: “The sūtras translated by Kumārajīva were all revised and corrected by Sengrui. Formerly Dharmarakṣa had issued the *Lotus Sūtra* which in the chapter *Shoujue* read: “The gods see the men and the men see the gods.” When Kumārajīva, translating [the same text], got to this point said: “This expression has the same meaning of the [original] Western [text] but the language is excessively unrefined”. [Sengrui] said: “Perhaps a better solution would be ‘Men and gods are in contact and obtain to see each other’.” Kumārajīva happily said: “Indeed, it is like that!” 「什所翻經，叡並參正。昔竺法護出《正法華經》。‘受決品’云：‘天見人，人見天。’什譯經至此乃言：‘此語與西域義同，但在言過質。’叡曰：‘將非人天交接，兩得相見。’什喜曰：‘實然。’」 (vol. 6, p. 364, b2-6) (for the translation of 將非 in this passage cf. 將非：（連）①表示測度、委婉的語氣，可譯作“或許”、“恐怕”、“莫非” (Dong Zhiqiao and Cai Jinghao 1994)); also, in a preface to the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* Sengrui relates that “[...] the dharma master [Kumārajīva] held the Sanskrit text and orally translated it into Chinese [...] The Qin ruler in person held the old version, checking its correct and mistaken renderings [...]” 「[...] 法師手執胡本，口宣秦言。[...] 秦王躬攬舊經，驗其得失。[...]」 (*Preface to the Larger Prajñāpāramitā* 大品經序 by Sengrui, in *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 8, p. 53, b3-10)

<sup>218</sup> Cf. on this Nattier 2008, p. 25

518)<sup>219</sup> records Kumārajīva's version of the scripture without giving any information about who was the scribe. Instead, Fei Zhangfang 費長房's catalogue (completed in 598), on the basis of a catalogue named *Er Qin zhongjing mu* 二秦眾經目 by Sengrui, indicates Sengzhao as scribe, then he adds that "Kumārajīva wrote by himself a commentary [on the scripture] and Sengrui wrote the preface"<sup>220</sup>. Admitted that Sengrui's catalogue is never mentioned in any other bibliographical work earlier than Fei Zhangfang's catalogue and hence is hardly reliable as a source<sup>221</sup>, the hypothesis that Sengzhao was the scribe is not to be discarded in principle. As I will argue in Chapt. 3 (see the section "Two different versions of Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*?"), it is likely that while Sengrui served as scribe in an earlier version of the same scripture produced by Kumārajīva (only few fragments of this work have been preserved), Sengzhao occupied this position when the second version was produced (this is actually the version that has been passed down to us).

For what regards the revision of the translated text, this was probably undertaken shortly after the translation. In fact, in Kumārajīva's commentary we find numerous assessments of renderings adopted by the scribe, sometimes these are backed with references to the Sanskrit version of the text (these comments are introduced by the script "the Sanskrit version says..." 梵本云): in most cases the master approves the renderings, however in few cases he is dissatisfied with them and proposes better solutions. These materials (which I have collected and analyzed in chapter 2, "References to the Sanskrit version") clearly demonstrate how independent the scribe was in his choices and how far the interpreter was from having total control over the actual translation output. They also prove that the written version of Kumārajīva's oral comment was revised by Kumārajīva himself after the final edition of the sūtra text had already been decided: only in such way could he insert in it this kind of assessments.

#### 4.3 Exegesis: oral explanation and annotation-based commentaries

During the translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* the translator not only orally produced a Chinese version of the scripture but also provided a detailed explanation of its terms and doctrinal contents. As we know from Sengzhao's preface, a crowd of monks and laymen (*dao su* 道俗) attended this great exposition of the dharma. Even though we might suppose that it was the "one thousand and two hundred monks expert in exegesis" 義學沙門千二百人 who played the major role in the actual discussion, the other members of the assembly were also allowed to express doubts and raise questions, thus contributing to clarifying the meaning of the scripture through a "question and answer" debate. In the *Commentary* [T1775] we find traces of this practice; in fact, ten questions from the audience followed by the master's explanation are preserved in Kumārajīva's Commentary. These materials - which I have analyzed in chapter 2, "Questions from the audience" - give us the unique chance to glimpse into some of the interests, doubts and concerns of the Chinese audience attending the translation ground.

Some monks attending the translation jotted down notes (*ji* 記) recording the oral exegesis, and these materials later served as a basis for the composition of written commentaries. In the case of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* we know from the sources that when Kumārajīva orally commented it "the words flew from his mouth as from the pen of a master so there was no [need] to cancel or change [any part of it]. His wording was refined and concise, and [the meaning expressed] was

<sup>219</sup> On this fundamental bibliographical work see Zürcher 2007, p. 10 and Link 1960, pp. 28 - 40.

<sup>220</sup> 「維摩詰經 三卷 (弘始八年於大寺出。是第四譯。與佛調、支謙、法護等出者，大同小異。僧肇筆受，見二秦錄。什自注解，叡制序)」 (*Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶記 [T2034], vol. 8, p. 77, c17-18)

<sup>221</sup> On this highly suspicious source see also Palumbo 2013, pp. 149 - 151. It bears mention that Fei Zhangfang's catalogue as a whole presents serious problems of reliability and has been subjected to the criticism of both later cataloguers and modern scholars. As Tokuno pointed out, "since all the sources Fei relied on (or claimed to have relied on) are either unspecified or lost, we have no means by which to confirm the validity of many of his ascriptions. Herein lies the chief reason for the controversies that have surrounded his ascriptions" (Tokuno 1990, p. 44)



always deep and far reaching”<sup>222</sup>. Indeed, Kumārajīva’s commentary is likely to represent a rather faithful transcript (albeit surely revised and rearranged) of his oral explanation; in fact, it does not exhibit the structure of a written composition and is instead characterized by a quite free elaboration on the text frequently resorting to the use of expository devices typical of the oral explanation like enumerations, allegorical stories, parables etc.

As to Sengzhao and Daoseng’s commentaries, things are much more complicated. In his preface to the text Sengzhao declares that:

「余以闇短。時豫 (read as 預) 聽次，雖思乏參玄，然龜得文意。輒<sup>223</sup>順所聞而為注解。略記成言，述而無作<sup>224</sup>。庶將來君子，異世同聞焉。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 58, b17-20)

[As to me,] I am slow-witted and very limited in knowledge. At that time, [when] I attended the translation-lecture, even though my mind could only partially fathom the mystery (i.e. the profound purport of the doctrine), nevertheless I roughly understood the meaning [of the text], and on my own initiative I prepared some explanatory annotations 注解 based on what I heard. I summarily recorded those ready-made explanations<sup>225</sup> and related them without creating anything on my own. I hope that [thanks to these annotations] the distinguished gentlemen of the generations to come will be able to listen to the same things I have heard.

We know for the above quote that Sengzhao personally attended the translation ground and annotated the explanations he had heard; he used roughly the same words in his letter to the recluse Liu Yimin of the Southern Mount Lu community written in 410, adding that he wrote down the annotations “in the idle moments during the lecture”<sup>226</sup>, probably meaning during the intervals; moreover, he relates with the proverbial humbleness of Chinese *literati* that “even though the wording is not refined, nevertheless the meaning [it conveys] is directly based [on Kumārajīva’s explanation]”<sup>227</sup>.

The expression “ready-made explanations” underlines the fact that the monk limited himself to record explanations issued by Kumārajīva; this statement is reinforced through the well-known quote from the *Confucian Analects* that immediately follows, “I relate without creating anything

<sup>222</sup> 并注維摩。出言成章，無所刪改。辭喻婉約，莫非玄奧 (Kumārajīva’s biography in *Gaosengzhuan* 高僧傳 [T2059], vol. 2, p. 332, c7-8)

<sup>223</sup> 輒：②用在動詞前，表示主觀上堅決去做，或不顧約束一意行之。可譯為“執意”、“擅自” (Dong Zhiqiao and Cai Jinghao 1994). This is also Tiqing’s understanding, cf. 「“輒”謂“自專”也。」《釋肇序》卷 1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2776, p. 439, b18)

<sup>224</sup> Cf. a passage from Sengzhao’s letter to Liu Yimin relating the same information 「什法師以午年出《維摩經》，貧道時預聽次；參承之暇，輒復條記[5]成言，以為注解。辭雖不文，然義承有本。」《肇論》卷 1 (CBETA, T45, no. 1858, p. 155, c27-29) [5]成=誠 ㄟ 【原】。

<sup>225</sup> I translate 成言 as “ready-made explanations” because in my opinion this interpretation fits particularly well with the context. This reading is supported by Wencai’s 文才(1241-1302) paraphrase of the same term in Sengzhao’s letter to Liu Yimin (T1858, p. 155, b22-p. 157, a11), viz. 「什公已成之言」《肇論新疏》卷 2 (CBETA, T45, no. 1860, p. 224, a26); see also Shi Deqing’s 釋德清 (1546-1623) exemplary exegesis of the whole passage from the letter: 「參承之暇，輒復條記成言（謂參承講說之暇，復條記什師現成之言）以為注解（此言註雖出肇手，而義則本乎什師）。辭雖不文，然義承有本（論主自謙維摩注解；辭雖不文，而義則承本什師）」《肇論略註》卷 4 (CBETA, X54, no. 873, p. 350, a7-9 // Z 2:1, p. 308, d16-18 // R96, p. 616, b16-18)).

Tiqing has recorded two more different (less convincing) interpretations: 「“誠言”有二。或作“成”字：成立此經經 (second 經 redundant) 之言；或作“誠”字。成者實也、當也。記什公誠當之言以解此經也」《釋肇序》卷 1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2776, p. 439, b20-22).

<sup>226</sup> 「參承之暇」(Zhao lun 肇論 [T1858], vol. 1, p. 155, c28)

<sup>227</sup> 「辭雖不文，然義承有本」*Ibidem*, p. 155, c29

on my own”<sup>228</sup> which had come to represent a common *cliché* among Confucian *literati* and also Buddhist scholar-monks<sup>229</sup> accounting for their deep respect for the “sages of the past” and hence, more in particular, for the figure of the master who was the living recipient of an extremely long-lived wisdom tradition. However, learning from a master always implied a personal appropriation of his teachings and such re-elaboration was somehow given for granted and even seen as a sincere and coherent reproduction of the master’s thought. As a matter of fact, if we closely examine Sengzhao’s commentary we find out that this is by no means a mere *verbatim* reproduction of “what he had heard” but instead an original work in which Kumārajīva’s explanations often serve as a basis for developing personal views which, however Buddhist in their essence, are much in tune with the patterns of traditional Chinese culture.

The same holds true for Daosheng’s commentary, which was surely composed later than Kumārajīva and Sengzhao’s ones<sup>230</sup>, probably during the first years after the monk’s return to the South. Even though it retained some information deriving from Kumārajīva’s explanation, it is clear how the author has already moved away from a literal word-by-word exegesis of the text and is experimenting with new and highly original exegetical approaches and commentarial formats which were to become dominant in later ages.

The next chapter is entirely devoted to the in-depth analysis of the features of Kumārajīva, Sengzhao and Daosheng’s commentaries which will be contextualized in the broader background of the life trajectory and intellectual development of the authors.

<sup>228</sup> “The Master [Confucius] said: “I transmit without creating anything [*ex novo*], I trust in and love antiquity, I venture to compare myself with our Old Peng” 子曰：“述而不作；信而好古；窃比于我老彭” (*Confucian Analects*, Chapter 7)

<sup>229</sup> The expression is found in the earliest Buddhist commentaries, see for example 「陳慧注義，余助斟酌，非師不傳，不敢自由也。」 (*Preface to Anban shouyi jing* 安般守意經序 by Kang Senghui 康僧會, in *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 6, p. 43, b29-a1) and similar expressions are used by other Kumārajīva’s disciples, see for example Sengrui’s 僧叡 *Preface to Viśeṣacintabrahma-paripṛcchā* 思益經序：「不同時事之賢，儻欲令見其高座所說之旨，故具載之于文，不自加其意也。」 (*Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 8, p. 58, a14-p. 57, c23)

<sup>230</sup> See the following passage of Daosheng’s biography in *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145]: “The śramaṇa from Chang’an Sengzhao first commented the *Vimalakīrti[nirdeśa]* and all his contemporaries carefully studied [the text]. Then [Dao]sheng further disclosed the deep meaning [of that sūtra] clearly exposing a new, original [interpretation of it]. All the Buddhist preachers adopted his exposition” 「關中沙門僧肇，始注維摩，世咸翫味。及生更發深旨，顯暢新異。講學之匠，咸共憲章其所述。」 (vol. 15, p. 111, b3-5)

## CHAPTER TWO

### An Analysis of *Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經: Kumārajīva's, Sengzhao's and Daosheng's Exegeses of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

In the former chapter I have discussed the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* as a by-product of the large-scale translation enterprise directed by Kumārajīva under the later Qin and contextualized it within the broader background of the historical development of Buddhist translation activity with its procedures and theoretical framework. In the present chapter I will instead examine in detail the three commentaries included in T1775, evidencing their different approaches, methods and focus, also by considering them in the context of the life trajectory and intellectual development of each author.

## 1. Between China and the Western Countries: Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*

Having provided an outline of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, its reception in China and the reasons for its appeal among the gentry class, we are now ready to discuss Kumārajīva's commentary on it. This will be preceded by a few biographical notes on the life of the great Kuchean translator.

### 1.1 Notes on Kumārajīva's biography

Kumārajīva's biography and his Buddhist curriculum have already been carefully analyzed by a number of scholars<sup>231</sup> and it is not my intention to discuss those works here or to add anything to them. I want instead to confine myself to briefly outlining the major events of Kumārajīva's life and providing some information which can help better contextualize his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*. Since some of Kumārajīva's dates are still debated, I will adopt here those proposed by Tang Yongtong.

According to his ancient biographies<sup>232</sup>, Kumārajīva was born in Kucha (*Qiuci* 龜茲) - a small oasis kingdom on the northern rim of the Tarim Basin and important center on the northern branch of the Silk Road - in 343 (or 344)<sup>233</sup> from the Kuchean princess Jīva and Kumārāyana, a Brahmin from Kashmir. Soon after his birth Jīva left the palace for becoming a Buddhist nun and the son followed her; in this period - at such a young age - he started studying the sacred texts with a master (which was probably the famous Fotushemi 佛圖舌彌) revealing a great early talent. At the age of nine, he was taken by his mother to Kashmir (*Jibin* 罽賓) where he studied under Bandhudatta, first cousin of the king, who instructed him on the the *Kṣudraka-piṭaka* 雜藏, the *Madhyamāgama* 中阿含 and *Dīrghāgama* 長阿含. Soon his name was known to the king and he earned an even greater fame by defeating the heterodox masters in debate at court.

After three years Kumārajīva and his mother set out again to move back to Kucha. On their way they stopped in Kashgar (*Shale guo* 沙勒國) for one year, during which Kumārajīva studied

<sup>231</sup> See for example Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, pp. 208 - 242; Pelliot 2000; Chen Yinke 2001 (b), pp. 28 - 74, Robinson 1967, pp. 71 - 95 and Yang Lu 2004

<sup>232</sup> We possess three biographies of Kumārajīva, the first authored by Sengyou 僧祐 (445 - 518) and included in *Chu sanzang jiji* (vol. 14, p. 100, a23-p. 102, a13), the second by Huijiao 慧皎 (497 - 554) included in *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059] (vol. 2, p. 330, a10-p. 333, a12) and the third by official historians which is found in the *Yishu* 藝術 section of the *History of the Jin* (*Jinshu* 晉書) (basically an abridged version borrowing its material from the former two). Baochang 寶唱 (464 - ?), a disciple of Sengyou, also had a biography of Kumārajīva in his *Mingseng zhuan* 名僧傳; however, this work is now lost and only few passages of the biography in question have survived, having been reproduced by the Japanese monk Shūshō 宗性 (1202 - ?) in his *Meisōden shō* 名僧傳鈔.

<sup>233</sup> Zürcher says 350 AD (see Zürcher 2007, p. 226)

Kātyāyana's great *Abhidharma*. Being kept in high regard by the king, he held public lectures on the sūtras while devoting his spare time to the study of extra-Buddhist sciences like the Vedic literature, astrology, calculation, divinatory arts etc. It was in this period that Kumārajīva was introduced to the Mahāyāna central conception of the emptiness of all dharmas by the śramaṇa Sūryasoma, and rapidly came to the conclusion that the principle was indeed correct. From then on he focused on the study of the *Vaipulya* texts and the three fundamental treatises of the Madhyamaka (namely, *Zhonglun* 中論, *Bailun* 百論, and *Shi'er men lun* 十二門論).

Once back in Kucha, he became the instructor of the king's daughter and eloquently exposed to the audience the key conceptions of the *Vaipulyasūtras*. At the age of twenty he was fully ordained at the royal palace, and at that age he learnt the *Sarvāstivāda vinaya* from Vimalākṣa. By that time, his fame had already spread far away to the distant lands of China.

In 384 the kingdom of Kucha was conquered by the Chinese general Lü Guang 呂光, who took Kumārajīva with him and kept him captive in his Western kingdom of the Latter Liang (in modern Gansu Province) for 17 years, notwithstanding the Qin rulers' (first Yao Chang and then Yao Xing) reiterated requests to send him to Chang'an. Neither Lü Guang nor his sons were interested in Buddhism and Kumārajīva was treated with very little respect. However, in the summer of 401 Yao Xing 姚興 organized a military expedition against Guzang 姑臧 (capital city of the Latter Liang) led by his uncle Yao Shuode 姚碩德; the latter conquered the kingdom and by the end of 401<sup>234</sup> Kumārajīva was sent to Chang'an. Received with great honors and appointed *purohita*, he was put in charge of a huge translation enterprise which produced the Chinese editions of a great amount of fundamental Buddhist scriptures with an accuracy and precision that were unprecedented and that greatly contributed to the spread of Mahāyāna teachings all over China.

Three aspects of Kumārajīva's biography are particularly relevant for my discussion and deserve a special attention, namely his personal doctrinal orientation, his original writings and his Chinese proficiency.

As it appears from his biography, Kumārajīva's knowledge of the Buddhist doctrines and theories was broad and eclectic, including such early collections as the Āgamas as well as the monumental doctrinal systematizations of the Sarvāstivāda school which was flourishing right at that time in Kashmir. Even so, from a doctrinal point of view the Kuchean master can be described as a devoted advocate of the Mahāyāna teachings<sup>235</sup>, and the fact that his translation work mainly focused on the sūtras and śāstras of the Great Vehicle clearly proves his intention to transmit this particular set of teachings to China. Since his arrival in Chang'an Kumārajīva mainly devoted his efforts to rendering in Chinese some veritable foundational works of the Mahāyāna: he retranslated the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* 大品 (its final revision was carried out in 404) and its huge commentary, the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (completed in 405), adding to them the *Hundred Verses Treatise* 百論 (404). However, being extremely lengthy and specialized these texts were hardly approachable by a general public. This is perhaps one of the reasons why in 406 it was decided to translate the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (406) and the *Lotus sūtra* (produced during the summer of the same year): these texts provided the Chinese believers with shorter and more "manageable" expositions of the Mahāyāna doctrines; moreover, they privileged the dramatic and narrative exposition (the *Lotus sūtra* is notoriously rich in parables and allegorical stories) over philosophical argumentation and scholastic systematization.

The three ancient biographies of the master all have a paragraph presenting Kumārajīva's original writings. They first mention the fact that he aimed at composing a Mahāyāna

<sup>234</sup> According to Zürcher it was in early 402

<sup>235</sup> For a discussion of Kumārajīva's own philosophical orientation see Tang Yongtong 200, vol. 1, pp. 236-242

Abhidharma that would even surpass the works of Kātyāyanīputra<sup>236</sup>, an ambitious enterprise which however was never undertaken for the reason that - the Kuchean master thought - “in the land of China those who could deeply understand it would be very few”<sup>237</sup>. Then they relate that “he only wrote a *Treatise on the True Characteristic* (*Shixiang lun* 實相論) in two fascicles for [the king] Yao Xing”<sup>238</sup>, a composition that is now lost. Only the *Gaoseng zhuan* adds to the latter the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*, this work being actually the only surviving original work by the master, exception made for some epistles addressed to Huiyuan 慧遠 written sometime after 405 and preserved in *Dasheng yi zhang* 大乘義章 [T1851].

As to Kumārajīva’s Chinese proficiency, even though the Kuchean master’s command of Chinese was often praised by his Chinese disciples<sup>239</sup>, we also find in the sources numerous references to his awkward explanations and his very approximate Chinese renderings<sup>240</sup>. Such an apparent contradiction can be explained bearing in mind the great divide between the spoken and written forms of the Chinese language: it is likely that Kumārajīva was quite well acquainted with the spoken Chinese of the time, but when it came to deal with the literary conventions and the subtleties of the written language - whose grammar was in many ways diametrically opposed to Sanskrit - he could not help but fall short of expectations. Moreover, the master often had to deal with concepts that were new to the Chinese and could not rely on any existing equivalent that could match them, so to convey those ideas to his Chinese assistants must have been a real challenge. Under such premises the debate on the meaning of the text which was at the very heart of the translation practice - and of which the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* is an important witness - was no doubt essential for overcoming the great conceptual, cultural and linguistic gaps. Such teamwork represented perhaps the only effective strategy for overcoming the individual limitations and for reducing the margin of error through a careful crosscheck.

## 1.2 Kumārajīva’s *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*

We know from the *Gaoseng zhuan* that when Kumārajīva orally exposed the *Shixiang lun* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* “the words flew from his mouth as from the pen of a master so there was no [need] to cancel or change [any part of it]. His wording was refined and concise, and [the meaning expressed] was always deep and far reaching”<sup>241</sup>. Kumārajīva’s commentary is

<sup>236</sup> “[Kumārajīva] often said with a sigh that if he took up the brush and wrote a Mahāyāna Abhidharma, this [work] could not be matched even for Kātyāyanīputra” 「常歎曰： “吾若著筆作大乘阿毘曇，非迦旃延子比也”。」 《高僧傳》卷 2 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 332, c3-5)

<sup>237</sup> 「在秦地深識者寡」 《高僧傳》卷 2 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 332, c5)

<sup>238</sup> 「唯為姚興著《實相論》二卷。」 《高僧傳》卷 2 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 332, c6)

<sup>239</sup> See for example Sengzhao’s *Preface to the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*: “[Kumārajīva] was well-versed in the Chinese language” 「善方言」 《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 58, b14-15)

<sup>240</sup> For example, in his *Preface to the Hundred Verses Treatise* 百論序 (404) Sengzhao says that “the Indian śramaṇa Kumārajīva [...] formerly had translated [this treatise] by himself, but since he did not yet master the Chinese language, the result was that those who pondered [on its meaning] were in doubt when confronted with the faulty renderings and those who tried to explain it went astray from its essential meaning 「有天竺沙門鳩摩羅什 [...] 先雖親譯。而方言未融。至令思尋者，躊躇於謬文；標位者，乖迕於歸致。」 《百論》卷 1 (CBETA, T30, no. 1569, p. 168, a2-6); Sengrui expresses the same opinion in his *Preface to the Mahāprajāpāramitopadeśa* 摩訶般若波羅蜜經釋論序 (405): “the Dharma master [Kumārajīva] has a general knowledge of Chinese. He has translated only a part [of this scripture], [but even though] his [spoken] Chinese is very good, [his Chinese translation] is still hardly understandable 「法師於秦語大格，唯譯一往；方言殊好，猶隔而未通。[...]」 《大智度論》卷 1 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 57, b24-25); Sengrui repeats that also in his *Preface to the Viśeṣacintabrahma-paripṛcchā* 思益經序 where he says that, as to the meaning of the Sanskrit title of the text, he “carefully listened to Kumārajīva’s explanation but notwithstanding his reiterated [attempts] the meaning was not yet fully clear [to me]. This was due to his still imperfect Chinese” 詳聽什公傳譯其名，幡 (read with variant 翻) 覆展轉，意似未盡。良由未備秦言，[...] 《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 57, c24-25)

<sup>241</sup> It must be noticed that while in *Chu sanzang jiji* this statement applied only to Kumārajīva’s *Shixiang lun* 實相論, in *Gaoseng zhuan* it is instead intended as referring to both the *Shixiang lun* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*.

likely to represent a rather faithful transcript of the oral explanations the master delivered during the translation of the sūtra<sup>242</sup>, even though after being written down it first underwent his personal revision (on this aspect see the section “1.2.2.2 “References to the Sanskrit version”) and later on numerous rearrangements by various editors. As a matter of fact, unlike other cases in which a clear distinction can be made between a certain translated text and its commentary, here the two are intimately connected to each other: they were born simultaneously and existed side by side in a sort of symbiosis, being the result of the same hermeneutical effort.

### 1.2.1 The middle way between domestication and foreignization

Like every translator, Kumārajīva had to make precise choices in order to find his way between the two extremes of “domestication” and “foreignization”<sup>243</sup>. In fact, excessively domesticating a text in a foreign language (i.e. adapting it too much to the receiver’s culture) would result in obliterating its diversity and inevitably dissolve the “foreign flavor” of the culture in which it was produced. Instead, when excessively foreignizing it, the text would become abstruse and hard to understand since the cultural gap would be too great to be covered by non-specialized readers.

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* shows how Kumārajīva is deeply aware of these pitfalls and tries to find an acceptable middle way between those two positions by carefully combining translation and comment: often a certain term chosen in translation is intended to “sound foreign” (this is especially true in the case of transliterations from Sanskrit) and to put the reader “on alert”, then the explanation bridges the cultural gap and allows the reader to easily approach the text and properly understand a certain term. This strategy emerges clearly when reading Kumārajīva’s and Zhi Qian’s version of the sūtra synoptically<sup>244</sup>. Let us consider a few concrete cases below.

a. There was a famous garden out of the city of Vaiśālī known as Āmrapālī Garden which had been donated by its previous owner (Āmrapālī) to the Buddha and his followers. A legend had it that Āmrapālī was born out of a mango tree, hence the name, which could be rendered as “lady Mango” (Āmra = mango fruit, *Mangifera indica*). Since the mango fruit was then unknown in China, early Chinese translations rendered the name of this woman as “Plum-lady” (*nain ü* 奈女; 奈 was originally written as 柰, or 柰), the *nai* 柰 being a native Chinese fruit, the *Prunus*

<sup>242</sup> This is *inter alia* suggested by the sometimes “unconventional” written Chinese which is found in Kumārajīva’s entries of the *Commentary* and reflects in my opinion the oral expression of a non-native Chinese speaker.

<sup>243</sup> Venuti’s definition of these two terms (which I have adopted here) is directly based on Schleiermacher analysis: “In an 1813 lecture on the different methods of translation, Schleiermacher argued that “there are only two. Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him”. Admitting (with qualifications like “as much as possible”) that translation can never be completely adequate to the foreign text, Schleiermacher allowed the translator to choose between a domesticating method, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home, and a foreignizing method, an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” (Venuti 1995, pp. 19 - 20). Elsewhere Venuti also points out that “domestication and foreignization deal with “the question of how much a translation assimilates a foreign text to the translating language and culture, and how much it rather signals the differences of that text” (Venuti 1998). On this see also Eco 2001, pp. 22 - 25.

<sup>244</sup> Cf. Tang Yongtong’s important general remark: “During the Three Kingdoms period (220 - 280 CE) when Zhi Qian and Kang Senghui translated the sūtras, they pursued literary refinedness and advocated that all terms should be translated into Chinese, opposing the use of terms transliterated from the foreign languages. So they rendered ‘Prajñā’ as ‘the Great Light [of wisdom] which leads to emancipation from suffering’ and ‘Subhūti’ as ‘Good Existence’; even the magical formulas were not transliterated. But starting from the Jin era many translators adopted transliteration and wanted their translations to be first of all reliable and correct, while the refinement of the style was considered a matter of secondary importance” 三國時支謙、康僧會譯經，力求文雅，專主意譯，并排斥採用胡音。故譯般若波羅蜜為明度，須菩提為善業。甚至咒語，亦不用音譯。但自晉以後，譯經多主直譯，先求信達，再事文雅 (Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 308)

*Salicina*)<sup>245</sup> and the garden as “Plum-lady garden”;<sup>246</sup> also Zhi Qian 支謙 in his previous translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* [T474] used the terms *naishi shuyuan* 奈氏樹園 (“Plum-lady garden”) or *naishi zhi yuan* 奈氏之園 (“Park of [the lady whose] surname was Plum”). Kumārajīva chooses to deviate from this “traditional” rendering<sup>247</sup> and stays closer to the Indian source; he translates “Mango Garden” 菴羅樹園 (*anluo* 菴羅 is the phonetic translation of *Āmra*) and then tries to explain to his Chinese audience what a mango looks like: “the mango fruit looks like a peach but it’s not”, and Sengzhao adds “*Mango* is the name of a fruit tree. Its fruit looks like a peach but it’s not. This Garden was previously [mistakenly]<sup>248</sup> called *Plum-lady [Garden]*. The story [of lady Mango] is related in another sūtra”<sup>249</sup>. This “translation issue” is noted and discussed by some later commentators such as, for example, Huiyuan 慧遠 (523 - 592) and Daoye 道液 (Tang dynasty)<sup>250</sup>.

We can notice how Kumārajīva, even in this apparently trivial matter (the fruit’s name does not hinder the comprehension of the passage), prefers to avoid a rendering that excessively domesticates the text; he transliterates the name of the foreign fruit and then uses the commentary to bridge the cultural gap and make his Chinese audience understand.

b. Another example of this approach is found in chapter 1 where we find Vimalakīrti entering among the Kṣatriyas in order to teach and guide them. Zhi Qian’s previous translation of the passage reads as follows:

「入君子種，正君子意，能使忍和。」《佛說維摩詰經》卷 1〈善權品 2〉(CBETA, T14, no. 474, p. 521, a16-17)

He entered among the Kṣatriyas, corrected their minds, and was able to make them tough.

<sup>245</sup> See *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字: “(奈) 柰，果也。假借爲奈何字。見《尚書》、《左傳》。俗作“奈”。非。从木。示聲。奴帶切。十五部。”

<sup>246</sup> Cf. for example T196 which is accepted by most scholars (including for ex. Zürcher and Nattier (cf. Nattier 2008, p. 104 - 105)) as an authentic work of the Eastern Han translator Kang Mengxiang 康孟詳: 「佛從迦維羅衛國，與千二百五十比丘俱，過拔耆國界度人民。去，至維耶離，詣奈氏樹園。」《中本起經》卷 2〈度奈女品 13〉(CBETA, T04, no. 196, p. 161, b22-23); cf. also T 638 translated by Dharmarakṣa, but then revised by Nie Chengyuan because too prolix and repetitive 「聞如是：一時，佛遊於維耶離奈氏樹園，」《佛說超日明三昧經》卷 1 (CBETA, T15, no. 638, p. 531, b28); see also T477 also attributed to Dharmarakṣa 「時，佛遊於維耶離奈氏樹園」《佛說大方等頂王經》卷 1 (CBETA, T14, no. 477, p. 588, b6).

It bears mention that in the Chinese Canon there are also two short texts narrating events related to Āmrapālī and her son Jīvaka in which the script *nainnūyuan* 奈女園 is found, viz. *Fo shuo Nainū qiyu yinyuan jing* 佛說奈女祇域因緣經 [T553] and *Foshuo Nainū qipo jing* 佛說奈女耆婆經 [T554] (the two texts present only minor differences). However, their attribution and dates are a debated topic. The attribution of T553 to An Shigao has been rejected by various scholars (for ex. Nattier remarks that the phrase 如是我聞 at the beginning of the text “did not come into use until the end of the fourth century CE” (Nattier 2008, p. 15 n. 26)).

<sup>247</sup> Cf. 「庵羅。[...] 纂要云：“舊譯為奈，誤也。此果多華子甚少。其葉似柳而長一尺。廣三指。果形似梨。而底鉤曲。生熟難知。可以療疾。彼國名為王樹。謂在王城種之。”」《翻譯名義集》卷 3 (CBETA, T54, no. 2131, p. 1102, c17-p. 1103, a8); 「佛在毘耶離城菴羅樹園說維摩詰經 ([...] 菴羅。舊譯為奈。其形似梨。華多子少。」《佛祖統紀》卷 3 (CBETA, T49, no. 2035, p. 157, b3-4). In these two quotes *jiuyi* 舊譯 (“old translation”) almost certainly indicates the pre-Kumārajīva translations; the Kucheian master’s versions were in turn often referred to (e.g. by Sengyou in *Chu sanzang jiji*) as *xinyi* 新譯 (“new translations”).

<sup>248</sup> The adverb “mistakenly” is added on the basis of the slightly different version of this comment line which is found in T2777 「肇曰。菴羅樹名也。其葉似桃而非。先言奈氏，失也。事在他經」《淨名經集解關中疏》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉(CBETA, T85, no. 2777, p. 441, c6-7).

<sup>249</sup> 菴羅樹園 (肇曰。菴羅樹 *Āmrāṭaka-vana*，其果似桃而非桃也。肇曰。菴羅果樹名也。其果似桃而非桃。先言奈氏，事在他經)《注維摩詰經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 328, b1-3)

<sup>250</sup> See Huiyuan’s *Weimo yiji* 維摩義記 T1776 (vol.1, p. 425, c14-19) and Daoye’s *Jingming jing Guanzhong shi chao* 淨名經關中釋抄 T2778 (vol. 1 p. 512, b21-23)



The term Kṣatriya is translated here with the word *junzi* 君子, a traditional Chinese term indicating the “gentlemen”, i.e. an exponent of the noble class who had formed himself in the culture of rites and music. This rendering was also adopted under the Western Jin by Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 in his translations. Kumārajīva prefers not to use it and opts instead for a transliteration followed by a detailed explanation of the term:

若在刹利，刹利中尊（什曰：梵音中含二義：一，言忍辱；二，言瞋恚。言此人有大力勢，能大瞋恚。忍受苦痛，剛強難伏。因以為姓也）《注維摩詰經》卷 2 〈方便品 2〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, b7-10)

K: [“Kṣatriya” 刹利] (caste of warriors/kings) in Sanskrit has two meanings: “tough” and “irascible”. It means that these men have great strength and are capable of great anger. They endure hardships, they are strong and hard to subdue. For this reason they bear this clan (=caste) name.

Again, the transliterated term used in translation creates a distance, making the Chinese audience aware of the fact that they are dealing with matters belonging to a different culture, then this gap is covered by the comment.

c. A third interesting case is found in chapter 3 where Śāriputra, addressing the Buddha, says: “World-honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about [Vimalakīrti’s] illness. Why? I remember once in the past, when I was sitting in repose beneath a tree. At the time Vimalakīrti came and said to me [...]” (MR, p. 85)<sup>251</sup>. The term translated as “sitting in repose” (*yanzuo* 宴坐) literally means “leisurely sitting” and - as Jan Nattier well explains - “has overtones of attendance at a luxurious banquet (*yan* 宴)”<sup>252</sup>. The term is clearly derived from Zhi Qian’s previous translation and reflects his attempt to employ “a vocabulary that evokes the image of a leisurely and cultured life, a practice which no doubt contributed to the great popularity of his translations among the Southern aristocracy”. However, Kumārajīva points out in a note:

什曰。[...] 此下“宴坐”梵本云：“攝身心”也。《注維摩詰經》卷 2 〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 344, a9)

K: [...] as to the term “leisurely sitting” which is found below, the Sanskrit text has “controlling body and mind”.

The Kuchean translator evidently felt that the term *yanzuo* 宴坐 used by the scribe was somehow misleading and inappropriate since it bore connotations that were alien to the original Sanskrit.

It is noteworthy that prior to Kumārajīva the term was commonly employed for example by Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 and also by Saṃghadeva 僧伽提婆 in his translation of the *Madhyamāgama* 中阿含經, and more than two centuries later Xuanzang maintained it in his rendering of the same passage of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Apparently, by Kumārajīva’s times this term, however inadequate, had already become a standard equivalent for the Sanskrit “to sit in meditation” and hence it continued to be used in translation with this meaning.

Renderings like “gentleman” for “Kṣatriya” and “leisurely sitting” for “meditation” are called by Jan Nattier “cultural calques”, a term which she defines as “translations that make no attempt to reflect the etymology of the Indian term, but instead employ what was viewed as a suitable

<sup>251</sup> 「舍利弗白佛言世尊我不堪任詣彼問疾。所以者何憶念我昔曾於林中宴坐樹下時維摩詰來謂我言」《注維摩詰經》卷 2 〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 344, a23-b5)

<sup>252</sup> Nattier 2000, p. 246. Nattier also adds that “the underlying Sanskrit term *pratisaṃlayana* (“meditative seclusion”), has no such connotations”.



counterpart in Chinese”<sup>253</sup>. Victor Mair adds that “these terms [...] may be classified as variously belonging to Confucian, Daoist, popular, and whimsical outlooks. [...] early translators of Indian texts into Chinese creatively used the entire inventory of Literary Sinitic (LS), picking and choosing from what was available to convey as best they could the ideas and images of this alien religion”<sup>254</sup>. As we can see from the examples above, Kumārajīva tried to avoid these solutions and discarded many cultural calques which were previously used in favor of transliterations or better renderings, however some of them (as *yanzuo* 宴坐 for “meditation”) were already so popular that it was impossible to get rid of them and continued to be used till very late times.

From the above examples we can appreciate Kumārajīva’s effort to introduce the Chinese audience to the Indian context on which basis terms and expressions are carefully explained, instead of being simply adapted to fit the Chinese cultural *milieu*. Perhaps he thought his predecessors had gone too far in changing Indian texts in order to adapt them to the Chinese taste ending up with obliterating the Indian cultural diversity, a preoccupation that Dao’an had already clearly expressed some 25 years before.

However, at the same time, in order to make his translations as readable and familiar as possible to a Chinese audience, Kumārajīva adapted to the Chinese literary style and conventions giving ample space to his Chinese collaborators in shaping the final version of the text. This choice emerges clearly when we look at his work through the eyes of the Tang exegete Kuiji 窺基, who was Xuanzang’s chief assistant in the translation work. In his own commentary to Xuanzang’s version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (*Shuo Wugoucheng jing shu* 說無垢稱經疏 [T1782]) he sometimes directly refers to Kumārajīva’s translation formulating some telling, albeit not at all flattering, comments.

For example, in the introduction of his work he examines the previous translations of the fourteen chapter titles of the sūtra: the eighth chapter, which in Xuanzang’s version is called “The causes of enlightenment” 菩提分品, is instead translated by Kumārajīva as “The Way of the Buddha” 佛道品<sup>255</sup>. Kuiji argues that, even though from a linguistic point of view this rendering could be acceptable (intending it as “the way leading to Buddhahood”), in choosing this terminology “Sengzhao’s [real] intention was actually to establish an identity between the Way of Laozi and the Way of the Buddha”<sup>256</sup>. In fact, the use of the word Way (*dao* 道) is not “innocent”, since it immediately alludes to the Taoist doctrine and envisions the Buddhist path as a Taoist-like Way of self-cultivation. Two points deserve to be noticed here: first, the fact that Kuiji blames Sengzhao for a biased translation of a term surely reflects a true fact, *viz.* Kumārajīva heavily relied on the help of his Chinese assistants, who were responsible for many of the renderings adopted<sup>257</sup>. Second, Kuiji openly opposes the use of Taoist terminology in the

<sup>253</sup> Nattier 2004, p. 10

<sup>254</sup> See Mair 2010, p. 249

<sup>255</sup> On the formation and use of the term *Fodao* 佛道 along with its important cultural implications see Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 65

<sup>256</sup> 「肇公意，欲以老子之道同佛之道，而以為名」《說無垢稱經疏》卷1〈序品1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1782, p. 1002, b28-29)

<sup>257</sup> Another interesting example of this phenomenon has been evidenced by Zürcher: in chapter 9 of the Kumārajīva’s *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* we find the passage “matter is emptiness: it is not so that matter [has to be] destroyed [in order to reach] emptiness” 色即是空，非色滅空 (p. 551, a19-20), which is an almost *verbatim* reproduction of Zhi Dun’s 支遁 (314 - 366) famous exegetical theory of emptiness as it was formulated in his *Miaoguan zhang* 妙觀章 (fragment quoted in Huida’s 惠達 *Zhaolun shu* 肇論疏 - second half sixth century -: 即色是空，非色滅空 (X866, p. 59, b4-5 // Z 2:1, p. 433, c8-9 // R96, p. 866, a8-9)). Zürcher explains this coincidence by saying that “Kumārajīva’s Chinese collaborators and redactors of his translations - people who, like Sengzhao, must have been fully conversant with the writings of the Chinese Buddhist exegetes of their times - may have been responsible for this rendering” (Zürcher 2007, p. 362, note 215). Notice that the same sentence had been rendered with a different wording in Zhi Qian’s previous version, *i.e.* 「色空，不色敗空」(T474, p. 531, b7-8)

translation of Buddhist scriptures and, much more important, claims the independence of Buddhism as a religious path *sui generis*, alien to Chinese traditional religious ideas.

Indeed, Kuiji's ideal of translation (which reflects Xuanzang's approach) is a more aseptic, "literal" rendering which maintains an almost word-by-word correspondence with the Sanskrit text. Correctness is understood as fidelity to the literal meaning, and from this perspective Kumārajīva is again harshly criticized. For example, in another passage of Kuiji's preface, the Kuchean master is blamed for having mistranslated the very title of the sūtra: instead of *The Vimalakīrtisūtra delivered by the Buddha* or *The Vimalakīrtisūtra* or other possible solutions he, "being the only one exception [among the previous translators], rendered it as *Sūtra delivered by Vimalakīrti*"<sup>258</sup>. But, claims Kuiji, the Buddha being the only source of the doctrine, how could it be that someone else is entitled to issue a sūtra?<sup>259</sup> Kuiji's bold conclusion is that "Kumārajīva was born in Kucha<sup>260</sup> and was not conversant with Indian Sanskrit. Not only his translation is superficial and incorrect, but he does not even grasp the meaning [of what is said in the source-text]"<sup>261</sup>.

This bitter criticism marks an evident shift in the approach to Buddhist translation during the Tang period. However, Xuanzang's fame and popularity notwithstanding, his translations were appreciated only by a restricted group of "specialized" readers endowed with an advanced and specific understanding of Indian Buddhism.

In conclusion, if Zhi Qian's translation had an evident domesticating bias in terms of lexical choice, Xuanzang's one tended to foreignize as much as possible in an attempt to reproduce almost *verbatim* the original Sanskrit. Kumārajīva's version represents a fair compromise between the two options: he manages to keep the text very readable and at the same time maintains the "foreign flavor" of the original. In this operation, his oral comment on the text plays an important role in allowing the Chinese exegetes to better understand the meaning of the original and hence to choose the most suitable Chinese rendering.

The fortune of Kumārajīva's version of this sūtra as well as many other Buddhist Classics in China and other countries of East Asia could well derive from his (and his collaborators') mastery in finding the "middle way" in translation.

<sup>258</sup> 「唯羅什法師，獨云《維摩詰所說經》。」《說無垢稱經疏》卷 1〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1782, p. 1001, c26-27). Cf. Sengrui's interesting comment on the sūtra title (whose extended version is "Sūtra of the Inconceivable emancipation [issued] by Vimalakīrti") which is likely to represent Kumārajīva's own explanation: "sūtras can be named after a person or after a [specific] teaching. If the sūtra has not been delivered by the Buddha himself, in most cases it is named after a person [who delivers it]; if instead it has been issued by the Buddha, in order to distinguish it from all the others, it is named after the [specific] teaching which is explained. The title of this sūtra includes both: using a person's name (i.e. Vimalakīrti), it indicates the source of the teaching; using a teaching's name (i.e. the inconceivable) it summarizes the essential meaning of the scripture. That is why both are used." 「夫經或以人為名，或以法為名者，自非佛所說，多隨人為名；佛之所說，非唯一經，故隨所說法以為名。此經總人、法二名者，以人為名則明法之所由，以法為名則略經之大體，所以兩存耳。」《淨名經集解關中疏卷上》卷 1 (CBETA, ZW02, no. 19, p. 178, a14-17)

<sup>259</sup> Cf. Kuiji's full argumentation on this issue: 「什公不依漢譯，存其梵音者。意許維摩亦得說經。良以身嬰俗妄，久離僧流。恐傍議而多生，所以許其說經。如《鹿女所說經》：經說鹿女事，非鹿女能說經！若對佛前，佛所印可。乃至天魔外道，亦得說經。雖許彼說。仍名佛說經。餘人不得說經。《瑜伽論》云：十二部中，弟子唯得說論、議經，理不違佛故。餘十一部，皆不許說。改換佛言。師資別故。若不爾者，師資何異？三藏之中，唯得說《阿毘達磨》。不得說餘二，師資既別。故知淨名、妙德不得說經，亦非彼經上下皆淨名說。何得云“維摩詰說”？」《說無垢稱經疏》卷 1〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1782, p. 1002, a4-15)

<sup>260</sup> Kucha 龜茲 was a Buddhist kingdom located on the branch of the Silk Road that ran along the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert in the Tarim Basin and south of the Muzat River.

<sup>261</sup> 「但是什公出自龜茲，不解中國梵語。不但澆訛不正，亦乃義意未融故也。」《說無垢稱經疏》卷 1〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1782, p. 1002, a17-19)

### 1.2.2 The building stones of Kumārajīva's exegesis

In his attempt to make the Chinese audience acquainted with the Indian cultural background Kumārajīva adopts different strategies or “exegetical devices” which he combines together in his oral explanation. They constitute the building stones of his exegesis.

On a basic level Kumārajīva's commentary clarifies the meaning of words and expressions particularly focusing on terms transliterated from Sanskrit and hence harder to grasp for a Chinese audience. He points out the polysemy of many of these, provides etymologies and supplies explanations based on the cultural context. He also frequently refers to the original Sanskrit version to assess the correctness of terms chosen by the scribes.

On a secondary level he further expands and enriches his explanation by using “numerical lists of elements”, references to Indian customs and lore, similes, parables, philosophical explanations etc. In these cases the text is used as a departure point for detours into Buddhist history, philosophy, hagiography etc.

Facing this unprecedented bulk of linguistic, philosophical and ethnographic information the Chinese Buddhists perhaps for the first time came to see India as an authoritative “other”: Buddhism was part of an extremely rich and sophisticated culture which couldn't be reduced into the framework of the Chinese tradition and had to be faced in its complexity and diversity<sup>262</sup>.

#### 1.2.2.1 Explaining Sanskrit terms

In his commentary, Kumārajīva devotes a lot of effort to explaining in great detail the meaning of many Sanskrit terms and even illustrating the etymology of many of them. Not only does he explains some key philosophical and religious terms, but also names of cities, characters, trees and fruits.

In the early fifth century it must have been still hard for the Chinese to come to terms with the many problems deriving from dealing with a language whose script was based on sounds (phonograms) rather than visual meaningful units like the Chinese characters (logograms). This language had words that had no Chinese equivalent and could only be rendered in sound through a phonetic transcription without its meaning being “attached” to the characters used for writing it. However, the *Commentary* shows how Kumārajīva's assistants under the master's guidance had thoroughly grasped not only the meaning of many of these “weird” transliterated terms but also their Sanskrit derivation<sup>263</sup>. In the first quote below in which Sengzhao relates the explanation of the word *pusa* 菩薩 delivered by his master an exemplary analysis of the term is made; in the second Kumārajīva himself explains the term *samyaksambuddha* 三藐三佛陀:

菩薩三萬二千 (肇曰: “菩薩” 正音云 “菩提薩埵”。“菩提” 佛道名也。“薩埵” 秦言 “大心眾生”。有大心入佛道名 “菩提薩埵”。無正名譯也) 《注維摩詰經》卷 1 (佛國品 1) (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 328, b20-22)

**Thirty two thousand bodhisattvas** (MR, p. 69) (SZ: The exact phonetic rendering of “Bodhisattva” is *putisatuo*. “Bodhi” is a term indicating the “Buddha's enlightenment”; “sattva” in Chinese means “beings who expressed the great intention [of pursuing buddhahood]”. Those

<sup>262</sup> In a detailed and fascinating study (Funayama Tōru 2008) Funayama has investigated the oral commentarial style of the Indian missionary Paramārtha 真諦 (499 - 569, arrived in China in 546), focusing particularly on “the blend of Indian and Chinese cultures that is evident in the works of Indian scholar monks who immigrated to China” (*op. cit.*, p. 142). It is noteworthy that many of the elements characterizing Paramārtha's commentarial method (i.e. revealing the multiple meanings of a word, interpreting the meanings of proper nouns, comparing India and China, comparing the theories of various Indian schools etc.) - even including those that according to the author “are rarely found in other Buddhist texts” - are actually found much earlier in Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*, and - as it has been shown in chapt. 1 - are already present *in nuce* in the glosses included in some of the translations produced by Dao'an's team during the 80s of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>263</sup> As a matter of fact, many of these transliterated terms were in use since at least Lokakṣema's times (second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century) and the Chinese translation attendants and devotees were surely familiar with them; however one may wonder to which degree of precision they had grasped their purport and whether or not they knew their exact etymology.

who hold the great intention to enter Buddha's enlightenment are called "Bodhisattvas". [In the Chinese language] there is no exact match for translating it).

[具諸佛法悉皆同等] 是故名為三藐三佛陀 (什曰: "三藐三菩提" 秦言 "正遍知"。今言 "三藐三佛陀", 言正遍覺也。見法無差故言 "正"。智無不周故言 "遍" 也。出生死夢故言 "覺" 也) 《注維摩詰經》卷 9 〈菩薩行品 11〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 405, a24-27)

[All [the buddhas] are identically replete in all these Buddha-Dharmas.] Therefore, they are called *samyaksaṃbuddha* (MR, p. 160) (K: *samyaksaṃbhodi* in Chinese means "correct all-pervasive comprehension". Now [when the text] says *samyaksaṃbuddha* it means "correct all-pervading awakening". To see all dharmas as having no essential difference [between them] is called "correct"; when wisdom is comprehensive it is called "all-pervasive"; to escape from the dream-like existence of saṃsāra is called "awakening")

Kumārajīva also provides detailed explanations of names of mythological creatures unknown to Chinese mythology, like the Yakṣas, the Asuras and the Kinnaras often followed by a concise description:

夜叉 (什曰: 秦言 "貴人" 亦言 "輕捷") 《注維摩詰經》卷 1 〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 331, c9)

Yakṣas (MR, p. 71) (K: in Chinese it means "nobleman" and also "light and fast")

阿修羅 (什曰: 秦言 "不飲酒"。不飲酒因緣出《雜寶 (read with variant -) 藏》。此是惡趣。男醜女端正<sup>264</sup>。有大勢力, 常與天共鬪也) 《注維摩詰經》卷 1 〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 331, c21-23)

Asuras (MR, p. 71) (K: In Chinese it means "not to drink wine". The reason why they do not drink is found in the *Kṣudraka-piṭaka*<sup>265</sup>. [To be reborn as an *asura*] is one [of the three] evil destinies. Males are ugly and females pretty. They have great strength and often engage in battles with the *deva*)

緊那羅 (什曰: 秦言 "人非人"。似人而頭上有角。人見之言: "人耶非人耶", 故因以名之。亦天伎神也。小不及乾闥婆) 《注維摩詰經》卷 1 〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 331, c25-27)

Kinnaras (MR, p. 71) (K: [this term] in Chinese means "human-like". Albeit looking like humans, they grow horns on their head. When men see them they say "Those [beings] have a seemingly human appearance", that's why they call them like that. They are also called "heavenly spirits [with a talent for] singing and dancing". They are smaller in size than the *gandharvas*")

<sup>264</sup> 端正: 猶言漂亮、俊俏 (Wang Yunlu, Fang Yixin 1992, pp. 133 - 135). According to Wang Yunlu and Fang Yixin this adjective is exclusively referred to a person's appearance; however, Li Weiqi has demonstrated that it is also used for describing objects, cities, buildings, trees and even animals (cf. Li Weiqi 2004, pp. 88 - 90).

<sup>265</sup> *Kṣudraka-piṭaka* (za zang 雜藏, lit. "miscellaneous repository"). As Hirakawa explains, "the *Kṣudraka-piṭaka* was the repository for materials that had been left out of the four *Āgamas* [...] and thus included both early and later texts. The Mahiśasaka, Dharmaguptaka, and Mahāsaṅghika were among those schools that included the *Kṣudraka-piṭaka* in their canon" (Hirakawa Akira 1990, p. 128). Cf. also the following passage from *Fenbie gongde lun* 分別功德論: 「所謂雜藏者, 非一人說, 或佛所說、或弟子說、或諸天讚誦, 或說宿緣三阿僧祇菩薩所生, 文義非一, 多於三藏, 故曰雜藏也。佛在世時, 阿闍世王問佛菩薩行事。如來具為說法。設王問佛: 「何謂為法? 」答: 「法即菩薩藏也。諸方等正經, 皆是菩薩藏中事。」先佛在世時已名大士藏。阿難所[\*]撰者, 即今四藏是也。合而言之, 為五藏也。」《分別功德論》卷 1 (CBETA, T25, no. 1507, p. 32, b6-13)

As we know from his biography (cf. section 1.1 Notes on Kumārajīva's biography), at the age of nine Kumārajīva was taken by his mother to Kashmir (*Jibin* 罽賓) where he studied under Bandhudatta, first cousin of the king, who instructed him on the the *Kṣudraka-piṭaka* 雜藏, the *Madhyamāgama* 中阿含 and *Dirghāgama* 長阿含.

Thanks to Kumārajīva's explanations the Chinese also discovered the polysemy of many Sanskrit words and realized how the Chinese language had no equivalent which could embrace all those meanings and match the term exactly. In the following comment the term *bhikṣu* is explained:

與大比丘眾八千人俱 (肇曰。 “比丘” 秦言或名 “淨乞食”， 或名 “破煩惱”， 或名 “淨持戒”， 或名 “能怖魔”。 天竺一名該此四義。 秦言無一名以譯之。 故存義名焉。 別本云： “摩訶比丘僧八千人俱”。 什曰。 [...] “摩訶” 秦言 “大”， 亦言 “勝”， 亦言 “多”。 於一切眾中最上。 天人所宗故言 “大”。 能勝九十六種論議故言 “勝”。 其數八千故言 “多”。 “比丘” 秦言 “破煩惱”， 亦言 “乞士”。 除五種邪命， 養法身故言 “乞士” 《注維摩詰經》 卷 1 〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 328, b4-13)

**Together with eight thousand great bhikṣus** (SZ: “bhikṣu” in Chinese means “[leading a] pure [life] by begging for food”, or “disrupting delusions”, or “purely keeping the moral precepts”, or “being able to scare the demons”. In the Indian language this one term has these four meanings, in Chinese there is no word for translating it. In order to preserve those meanings it is called like that). **Another version says**<sup>266</sup>: “**Together with eight thousand Mahā-bhikṣus**” (K: “Mahā” means “great”, means “victorious”, and also means “many”. They (i.e. the great bhikṣus) are supreme among all beings and are revered by gods and men, thus they are called “great”. They can win over the ninety-six [heterodox] theories, thus are called “victorious”. “Bhikṣu” in Chinese means “disrupting delusions” and “mendicant”. They refuse the five improper means of living and nourish their dharma-body, thus they are called “mendicants”)<sup>267</sup>

Kumārajīva also provides the etymologies of some proper names appearing in the text. For example when the city of Vaiśālī is mentioned he explains:

佛在毘耶離 (什曰。 “毘” 言 “稻土 (read with variant 田) 之所宜” 也。 “耶離” 言 “廣嚴”。 其地平廣莊嚴。 肇曰。 毘耶離， 國土名也。 秦言 “廣嚴”。 其土平廣嚴事， 因以為名也) 《注維摩詰經》 卷 1 〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 328, a26-29)

**The Buddha was in Vaiśālī** (K: “Vai” means “[land] suitable for [setting up] rice fields”. “Śālī” means “vast”. Its land is a flat and vast adorned [expanse]; **SZ**: Vaiśālī is the name of a kingdom. [This word] in Chinese means “vast and adorned”. Its land is flat, vast and adorned, hence the name)

Definitions like those mentioned above are found throughout the *Commentary* and represent an important component of Kumārajīva's exegesis. In an epoch when information about India was scanty and the first few Chinese pilgrims who had set off to their perilous travels to the holy land of the Buddha had not yet returned, Kumārajīva's explanations (which are found particularly in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* and the *Dazhidulun*) became foundational in many respects. Being exemplary in their precision, clarity and concision they were to be quoted in many important Buddhist lexicographic works of later ages constituting an authoritative reference material for those compilers. See, for example, the important *Collection of Terms and their Explanations [in Buddhist] Translations* (*Fanyi mingyi ji* 翻譯名義集 [T2131]) by Fayun

<sup>266</sup> The expression “Another version says...” (*bieben yun* 別本云) - which appears only in Kumārajīva's entries (27 occurrences in total) - introduces a slightly different version of some passages of the sūtra. This must be due to the fact that Kumārajīva's separate commentary originally referred to a version of the sūtra that in some points differed from that followed by Sengzhao and Daosheng; hence when assembling the three commentaries into one text the editors of T1775 added the variants in order to make Kumārajīva's comment intelligible (cf. on this the section “2.1 Another version says” of Chapt. 3)

<sup>267</sup> Notice that an almost *verbatim* explanation is found in *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 T1509, vol. 3, p. 79, b25-c2

法雲 (1088 - 1158, Southern Song dynasty)<sup>268</sup> which borrows heavily from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*.

Not only the definitions contained in this commentary made a contribution to the study of lexicography and the composition of Buddhist lexicons, but many of the criteria for choosing the Chinese rendering of Sanskrit terms adopted by Kumārajīva and sometimes explicated in his annotations were to be followed by other translators after him and finally codified under the Tang by Xuanzang. As Fayun relates in the first section of his work:

The dharma master Xuanzang clarified the five cases in which one should not translate [and should instead use transliteration]:

1. when [the meaning] is secret and mysterious [the term] should not be translated, like in the case of the *dhāraṇī* spells<sup>269</sup>;

2. when a term has many different meanings (polysemy) it should not be translated, [see] for example the term *bhagavat* which has six meanings;

3. when the object in question is not found here [in China] the term [indicating it] should not be translated, [see] for example the *jambu* tree 閻浮樹 [which does not grow in our lands];

4. [when it is preferable to] adhere to the old (i.e. to a previous, well established transliteration) a term should not be translated. Take as an example [the term] *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi*: in principle it could certainly be translated, but since Kāśyapa-mātāṅga (? - 73) (i.e. since the first introduction of Buddhism in China) it is customary to keep using the transliteration from Sanskrit (i.e. *a'nou puti* 阿耨菩提);

5. [when it is needed to] inspire deference [a certain term] should not be translated. For example [the translation] *bore* 般若 [for *prajñā*] will sound much more deferential than *zhìhuì* 智慧 (“wisdom”, in a more profane sense)<sup>270</sup>. In order to inspire respect [in the readers] the term is not translated<sup>271</sup>.

### 1.2.2.2 References to the Sanskrit version

In his commentary Kumārajīva frequently refers to the Sanskrit version of the text (I have found in total 28 such references) pointing out slight differences with the Chinese translation, assessing certain renderings, proposing more accurate solutions or even pointing out words which are found in translation but are missing in the original or *vice versa*. This makes once more clear that, as I said in the first chapter, the “main translator” was far from having total control over the actual translation output. In fact, it was up to the scribes, upon listening to his oral translation and exegesis, to choose the most suitable Chinese wording, to revise the text and then edit the final version. This *modus operandi* made it possible that occasionally they opt for solutions upon which the “translator” himself did not fully agree.

Many references to the Sanskrit text are introduced by the expression “The Sanskrit version says...” 梵本云. One instance has already been discussed above, let us now consider a few more

<sup>268</sup> This text, which was compiled about 1151, contains 2040 entries of terms transliterated from Sanskrit divided into 64 chapters (*pian* 篇); each word is carefully explained and a great deal of quotes from different texts and exegesis of eminent Buddhist masters are provided as reference material.

<sup>269</sup> The efficacy of those spells depended on their sound rather than their actual meaning

<sup>270</sup> This prescription is already found in *Dazhidulun* 大智度論 where it is said: 「不可稱者稱名智慧。般若定實相，甚深極重。智慧輕薄，是故不能稱。又般若多、智慧少，故不能稱。又般若利益處廣，未成能與世間果報。成已與道果報。又究竟盡知故名稱般若波羅蜜。無能稱知若常若無常若實若虛若有若無。如是等不可稱義應當知。」《大智度論》卷 70 〈問相品 49〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 552, a2-8)

<sup>271</sup> 「唐英法師明五種不翻：一，祕密故不翻，陀羅尼是；二，多含故不翻，如薄伽梵含六義故；三，此無故不翻，如閻浮樹；四，順古故不翻，如阿耨菩提，實可翻之，但摩騰已來存梵音故；五，生善故不翻，如般若尊重，智慧輕淺，令人生敬，是故不翻。」《翻譯名義集》卷 1 (CBETA, T54, no. 2131, p. 1057, c7-12)



interesting occurrences; I will proceed by first providing a translation of the passages in question and then formulating a few observations on them.

a. [菩薩三萬二千] 眾所知識。別本云：“眾所敬仰”（什曰：梵本云：“多知多識”。顯德應時，故物<sup>272</sup>咸知識，物咸知識，故敬之者眾。此義則出也）《注維摩詰經》卷 1 〈佛國品 1〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 328, c2-4）

**[There were thirty-two thousand bodhisattvas] recognized by the congregation** (MR, p. 69) (Another version says: “revered by the congregation” K: The Sanskrit version says: “much known and much acknowledged”. The bodhisattvas promptly manifest their virtues, thus all beings get to know them and they are revered by many. This is where the meaning [delivered in translation] comes from).

In this case Kumārajīva explains why “revered by many” 眾所敬仰 can be considered a quite faithful rendering of the original Sanskrit “much known and much acknowledged” 多知多識. The reference to the Sanskrit version accompanied by the comment constitutes a well-argued endorsement of the translation and it perhaps describes the process through which that final term was chosen.

b. 菩薩三萬二千[……]蓋諸大眾（什曰。梵本云：“眾不能蓋”。“眾不能蓋”明其超出。今言“蓋眾”。其言亦同也）得無所畏《注維摩詰經》卷 1 〈佛國品 1〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 329, c5-7）

**There were thirty-two thousand bodhisattvas [...] towering over the great assembly** (K: The Sanskrit version says: “the many (i.e. the crowd, the congregation) cannot cover them”, meaning that they stood out of the crowd. Now [the Chinese text] says “they covered (=towered over) the crowd”, the meaning is the same). **They had obtained fearlessness**<sup>273</sup>.

c. 隨所調伏眾生而取佛土（什曰。梵本云“毘尼”。“毘尼”言“善治”。善治眾生，令棄惡、行善也。隨其棄惡多少、行善淺深，以成其國。“調伏”旨同而語隱。故存其本也）《注維摩詰經》卷 1 〈佛國品 1〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 334, c22-25）

**They acquire the Buddha lands according to the sentient beings they discipline** (MR, p. 75) (K: the Sanskrit version says: “vinaya”. *Vinaya* means “to be good at controlling”. To be good at controlling the beings means to [know how] to let them abandon evil and do good. According to the degree to which those beings abandon evil and do good, they (i.e. the bodhisattvas) achieve their [Buddha] land. [Compared to “control” (*vinaya* 毘尼)] “to discipline” 調伏 is equal in meaning even though less explicit, hence it maintains the original meaning).

In these two other cases Kumārajīva points out the fact that, even though the Sanskrit text is slightly different in its wording, the terms chosen in translation are definitively suitable ones. In the first quote, to “tower over the great assembly” 蓋諸大眾 is an acceptable rendering of “the great assembly cannot cover them” 眾不能蓋 even though in the two expressions *gai* 蓋 takes two different meanings, to “tower over” in the first case, and “to cover” in the second.

In the second quote the term “to discipline” is basically equivalent to *vinaya* 毘尼, “to control”, however less explicit according to the Kuchean translator.

<sup>272</sup> 物: (2) 常指眾人、一般人，用以泛指 (Cai Jinghao 1990, p. 346)

<sup>273</sup> Considering this remark by Kumārajīva, the English rendering of this passage by Watson (“There were also thirty-two thousand bodhisattvas.[...] They towered over the others of the great assembly and had learned to be fearful of nothing” (Watson 1997, p. 17) is more faithful to the Kuchean translator’s interpretation than McRae’s one - which in this case I have not followed -, which reads instead “There were thirty-two thousand bodhisattvas [...] who] had attained fearlessness in sheltering the great congregations” (MR, p. 69)

d. [諸佛所說深經[...]] 陀羅尼印印之 (什曰。總持有無量。實相即總持之一。若經中說實相, “實相即是印”。以實相印封此經, 則為深經也。復次“印”梵本言“相”, 實相也。以實相為經標相也) 《注維摩詰經》卷 10〈法供養品 13〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 415, b16-19)

[The profound sūtras explained by the buddhas[...]] are sealed by the seal of dhāraṇī (MR, p. 173) (K: there are innumerable dhāraṇīs, and the “true characteristic [of reality]” is one of them. If in a sūtra the True Characteristic is explained, [then] the True Characteristic is its seal. Since this sūtra is sealed with the seal of the True Characteristic, it is a “deep sūtra” (i.e. a Mahāyāna sūtra). Moreover, “seal” 印 in the Sanskrit version is written “characteristic” 相, bearing the meaning of “true characteristic”. This scripture has the “true characteristic” as its emblem.

In this case Kumārajīva makes an interesting comment based on a linguistic remark. Instead of “seal” (yin 印) the Sanskrit text has “characteristic” (xiang 相), a term which should be intended as “[the true] characteristic [of reality]” and which constitutes, as the master explains, the trademark of the “profound sūtras”, i.e. the Mahāyāna sūtras, texts expounding the ultimate, deep meaning of the Buddha’s doctrine, the true characteristic of all dharmas, i.e. emptiness.

Incidentally, this might well be one of the not infrequent cases in which the Kuclean master attaches to the generic term *xiang* 相 (whose most common meanings in the Buddhist literature are “form”, “appearance”, “characteristic”, “distinctive feature”, “mark”, “aspect” etc.) the philosophically pregnant meaning of *shixiang* 實相<sup>274</sup>; as a matter of fact, such interpretation (and even the use of the term *xiang* 相) is absent from Zhi Qian and Xuanzang’s translation of the same passage. In any case, to fully convey Kumārajīva’s understanding of this passage, we should translate it as: “[The profound sūtras explained by the buddhas] are sealed by the dhāraṇī of the [True] Characteristic [of reality]”.

e. 善說法要 (什曰。此文不便。依經本應言“以要言說法”, 謂能簡要之言折繁理也)

《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 370, c28-29)

**Able to express the essentials of the dharma** (K: The wording of this sentence is rather inappropriate<sup>275</sup>. Relying on the source text the meaning should be “to express the dharma with essential words”, meaning to be able to use a concise wording for discussing (lit. analyzing, “breaking down”) complicated principles).

In the above quote Kumārajīva’s criticism towards the translated text seems stronger than in the previous cases. The rendering is considered “inappropriate” and then corrected in the comment line upon checking the source text.

Finally, it is noteworthy that some of the alternative renderings proposed by Kumārajīva in his comment were to be adopted by Xuanzang in his retranslation of the sūtra more than two centuries later. Let us consider for example the following passage:

<sup>274</sup> On this aspect see Zacchetti 2015, in particular pp. 181 - 184 and the section “Philosophical explanations” below in this chapter.

<sup>275</sup> The expression *bubian* 不便 referred to the wording 文 must not necessarily be understood as “mistaken”, but rather as “inappropriate”, “not totally acceptable”. There can be translations which despite conveying the exact meaning (*yi* 義 or *li* 理) are not the best solution in terms of style (*wen* 文). Compare for example the following statements in which *bubian* 不便 is used: 「於義雖順, 於文不便」《阿毘曇毘婆沙論》卷 6〈智品 2〉 (CBETA, T28, no. 1546, p. 42, b19-20); 「有人評此二解, 謂“冶城”於文為得, 於理為失。 “開善”於理為得, 於文不便。」《大般涅槃經疏》卷 17〈梵行品 20〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1767, p. 142, a6-7); 「於義甚善, 在文不便」《華嚴經行願品疏》卷 4 (CBETA, X05, no. 227, p. 97, a15 // Z 1:7, p. 284, c18 // R7, p. 568, a18)



f. 說法無悋 (什曰。梵本云“無師倦”。外道師為弟子說法。法之要者則握而不與。菩薩則盡其所懷。故言無“師倦”也) 《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈菩薩行品 11〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 407, a10-12)

[To] explain the dharma without parsimony (MR, p. 161) (K: the Sanskrit version says “without being reluctant as masters [to transmit their knowledge]<sup>276</sup>”. When the heterodox masters teach the dharma to their disciples, they keep for themselves the essence of it. The bodhisattvas instead transmit everything they know, thus [the text says] “without them being reluctant as masters [to transmit their knowledge]”)

Kumārajīva points out that instead of “without parsimony” the Sanskrit text has “without being reluctant as masters [to transmit their knowledge]”. It is precisely this rendering that was chosen by Xuanzang in T476, where he translates the same passage as “they explain the dharma without being reluctant as masters [to transmit their whole knowledge]”.<sup>277</sup>

Sometimes references to the Sanskrit text are made by Kumārajīva in order to point out words which are found in translation but are missing in the original or *vice versa*. Let us consider as an example the following cases:

g. 【行無厭慈[...] 行法施慈[...] 行持戒慈[...]] 行忍辱慈，護彼我故 (什曰。若能行忍。則內不自累，外不傷物。故言護彼我也。凡此中“慈”上“行”字，梵本中無) 《注維摩詰經》卷 6〈觀眾生品 7〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 385, a15-17)

【[I should] practice the sympathy of nonrevulsion [...] [I should] practice the sympathy of the charity of Dharma [...] [I should] practice the sympathy of morality [...]] I should practice the sympathy of forbearance, because of protecting others and self (MR, p. 125) (K: If one is able to practice forbearance he will not hinder himself internally nor harm the others externally, thus it is said “[because of] protecting others and self”. In all the [previous] expressions<sup>278</sup> the [verb] “to practice” preceding the word “sympathy” is absent in the Sanskrit version)

h. 修治菩提 (什曰。梵本“菩提”下有“道”字。“道”即趣菩提道也) 《注維摩詰經》卷 10〈法供養品 13〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 414, a22-23)

They will cultivate Bodhi (MR, p. 171) (K: in the Sanskrit version “bodhi” is followed by the word “path”. The *path* indicates the way leading to the Bodhi (i.e. enlightenment))

i. 佛言：“善哉善哉，天帝！如汝所說。吾助爾喜。此經，廣說過去、未來、現在諸佛不可思議阿耨多羅三藐三菩提 (什曰。梵本此“菩提”下有“法”字也) 《注維摩詰經》卷 10〈法供養品 13〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 414, b5-8)

The Buddha said, “Excellent, excellent! Heavenly emperor, it is as you have spoken. I am happy for you! This sūtra extensively explains the inconceivable *anuttarā samyaksaṃbodhi* of the buddhas of the past, present, and future (MR, p. 171) (K: in the Sanskrit version the word “bodhi” is followed by “dharma”)

Remarks of this kind, however marginal they might seem, account for the accuracy, rigor and punctiliousness of the Kuchean master in his translation work. Moreover, belonging to a sort of meta-text, they give us the chance to look into the process through which the commentary itself

<sup>276</sup> As Huilin 慧琳 explains in his *Yiqie jing yinyi* 一切經音義, the correct writing of this term is *shijuan* 師捲, *juan* 捲 being a variant of *quan* 拳 (fist), from which the meaning of “keeping a firm grip on something and not giving it to others” Cf. 「師捲 (又作“拳”同渠員反。指握為捲。譬喻也。言師之匠物不如捲之執握忝而不說也。)」

《一切經音義》卷 28 (CBETA, T54, no. 2128, p. 498, b10)

<sup>277</sup> 「敷演法教，不作師倦。」《說無垢稱經》卷 5〈菩薩行品 11〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 476, p. 582, c25-26)

<sup>278</sup> This quote is preceded in the sūtra by an even longer series of the different kinds of “sympathy” (*ci* 慈) which according to Vimalakīrti should be practiced by the bodhisattvas.

was composed. It seems clear, for example, that even though Kumārajīva's oral comment was noted down by some monks attending the translation of the sūtra, afterwards it was personally revised and rearranged by himself while also checking the Chinese rendering of the sūtra text. Evidently, these notes could be added only after the final text of the translation had been fixed and could no longer be corrected on the basis of the master's indications.

### 1.2.2.3 Elucidation of categories

As pointed out above, Kumārajīva often expands on the text enriching his explanation with a variety of additional materials. One of these expansions might be called "elucidation of categories": in the text terms are found which are traditionally included in a certain category (for example "material nourishment" 揣食 is included in the category of the "four nourishments" 四食) or which can represent themselves a category of elements (for example Māra 魔 - the destroyer - includes four - or even more - kinds of "destroyers").

The use of such numerical lists of items included in different categories (which are known in Pāli as *mātikās*; Skt., *māṭrkās*) is typical of much of Indian philosophical literature (even though apparently the early Buddhists' wide application of such "expedient" was hardly matched by other schools) and constitutes an unmistakable sign of its oral origin. In fact, (as Gethin has pointed out in a very interesting study on the subject<sup>279</sup>) in the first place *mātikās* represent a mnemonic device enabling one to remember and organize through a sort of ideal "chart" a lot of material, and in the second they "act as a kind of flowchart for the composition of a discourse. They indicate the various paths and themes that the composer can choose to follow and expand as she feels appropriate. The matrix of interconnecting lists provides a form or structure within which she can improvise. Provided she knows the structure well and is endowed with a certain skill, she can be confident she will not lose her way"<sup>280</sup>.

Memorization and constant repetition of these categories must have continued to play an important role in the Buddhist training of later ages and Kumārajīva himself must have undergone such exercise. Being traditionally used as building blocks for oral composition, it must have come more than natural to use them to expand on certain terms while explaining the text.

However it is worth pointing out that in Kumārajīva's exegesis *mātikās* - albeit used with great frequency - do not work on a structural level (i.e. his exposition is not entirely organized on the basis of such numerical lists), as it is the case for many Buddhist expositions and texts<sup>281</sup>. Rather, the impression is that the Kuchean master adapted such ancient expository tool to the new task of transmitting the doctrine to a foreign audience: given that the content of *mātikās* was very varied and encompassed a wide range of topics, he probably thought they could represent an easy and effective way of introducing the Chinese believers to the Indian cultural universe.

Let us consider some of the categories explained by the master:

[供養一切沙門]婆羅門及諸外道貧窮下賤孤獨乞人 (什曰。乞人有三種。一，沙門；二，貴人；三，下賤。隨其所求，皆名為乞人也) 《注維摩詰經》卷 4 〈菩薩品 4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 367, c26-28)

**[We made offerings to all the śramaṇas,] brahmins, those of the heterodox paths, the poor, low-class, orphans, and beggars** (MR, p. 103) (K: there are three kinds of beggars: 1.the śramaṇas, 2.the nobles and 3.the low-class. Having different things to beg for, they are all called "beggars")

<sup>279</sup> Gethin 1992; "a *mātikā* can be any schedule or table of items or lists— but especially one built up according to a system of numerical progression— that acts as a basis for further exposition" (*Op. cit.* p. 160)

<sup>280</sup> *Op. Cit.* p. 156

<sup>281</sup> For example, Gethin states that "the Abhidhamma would appear to evolve out of an already developed practice of taking a list or combination of lists, and then expanding it to produce an exposition. [...] The works of the canonical Abhidhamma [...] in part are to be seen as the result of a process of drawing up *mātikās* and exploiting them in ways already adumbrated in the sutta literature." (*Ibidem*, p. 162)

為壞和合相故應取揣食（什曰。[...] 食有四種：一曰揣食；二曰願食，如見沙囊命不絕，是願食也；三曰業食，如地獄不食而活。由其罪業應久受苦痛也；四曰識食。無色眾生，識想相續也。壞和合相即是實相。令其以是心行乞也）《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 348, b3-8）

**[Vimalakīrti said: “Kāśyapa...] it is because of the destruction of one’s physical integrity that you should take that lump of food”** (MR, p. 87) (K: [...] there are four kinds of food: 1.the material nourishment;<sup>282</sup> 2. the vow-nourishment;<sup>283</sup> like when seeing a sandbag, [imagining it contains food] one [is sustained by hope and] does not die<sup>284</sup>; 3. The karmic-nourishment; for example in hell it is not needed to eat for staying alive, [in fact] because of the influence of the bad actions performed in the past one has to [stay alive and] suffer for long time [all kinds of] pain; 4. The perception-nourishment; for example, the beings living in the formless realm [have no material bodies and] are made of ever-perpetuating mental perceptions. The “destruction of one’s physical integrity” is the “true characteristic [of reality]”. [Vimalakīrti] exhorts [Kāśyapa] to practice begging with his mind).

〔出家者〕無所受（什曰。“受”義，言“取”。取有四種。在家人有愛取；出家人有戒取、見取、愛取。真出家者，無此四受；亦於一切法無所受也）《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 358, b19-21）

**[Leaving home is] to be without thoughts of possession** (K: “[to have] thoughts of possession” means “[to have] attachment”. There are four kinds of attachment: 1.those leading a household life (Skt. *grha-stha*) are attached to the [five] desires (*kāma-upādāna*); 2.those who have become monks are attached to the rules (*sīla-upādāna*), 3.to [the different] views (*ditthi-upādāna*) and 4.to the desires<sup>285</sup>. Those who have *truly* become monks do not have these four thoughts of possession; also, they do not attach themselves to *any dharma* [whatsoever]).

〔甘露法之食，〕解脫味為漿（什曰。味有四種：一出家、離五欲。二行禪、離憤亂煩惱。三智慧離妄想。四涅槃離生死。亦有二種解脫：一解脫煩惱。二解脫於閻也。亦云，愛性無漏（read with variant 厭）名之為渴。愛斷則得解脫。解脫止愛渴故名漿。四味亦以除愛渴故為漿也）《注維摩詰經》卷 7〈佛道品 8〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 395, a16-21）

**[His food is the sweet dew of the Dharma,] and his drink the flavor of emancipation** (MR, p. 137) (K: [emancipation has] four kinds of flavor: 1.[the flavor tasted when] becoming a monk and abandoning the five desires; 2.[the flavor tasted when] practicing meditation and abandoning [all] distresses and afflictions; 3.[the flavor tasted when] wisdom [is acquired] and the deluded thoughts are abandoned; 4. [the flavor tasted when] nirvāṇa [is reached] and saṃsāra abandoned.

There are also two kinds of emancipation: 1. Emancipation from afflictions; 2. Emancipation from hindrances.

Furthermore, [an attitude of] insatiable craving is called “thirst”; when this craving is eradicated one achieves the emancipation. Since emancipation quenches the thirst of craving it is called “drink”. Also the four flavors, in that they appease the thirst, are called “drinks”)

<sup>282</sup> The term *chuaishi* 揣食 indicates the Indian way of eating by first rolling the food into a ball in the hand (definition from Soothill 2010)

<sup>283</sup> *Yuanshi* 願食, lit. “vow-food”; to nourish the life by the vow, and thus have strength to fulfil its duties (definition from Soothill 2010)

<sup>284</sup> The meaning of this expression is not quite clear, my interpretation is only tentative.

<sup>285</sup> *Aiqu* 愛取 is perhaps a mistake for *wo qu* 我取 (or *woyu qu* 我語取) (Skr. *ātman-ūpādāna*) “clinging to the self”. In fact, Sengzhao explains right after Kumārajīva: “[‘to be without thoughts of possession’] means to be without the four [kinds of] attachment, [which are] 1.attachment to desire, 2.attachment to the self, 3.attachment to the rules, 4.attachment to the [different] views” 肇曰。無四受也。欲受、我受、戒受、見受。《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 358, b21-22）

譬如象馬[怡-台+龍]候不調，加諸楚毒，乃至徹骨，然後調伏（**什**曰。馬有五種：第一，見鞭影，即時調伏；第二，得鞭乃伏；第三，以利錐，刺皮乃伏；第四，穿肌乃伏；第五，徹骨乃伏。眾生利鈍亦有五品：第一，但見他無常，其心便悟；第二，見知識無常，其心乃悟；第三，見兄弟親戚無常，其心乃悟；第四，見父母無常，其心乃悟；第五，自身無常，極受苦惱，復加以苦言，然後乃悟也）《注維摩詰經》卷 8〈香積佛品 10〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 401, c24-p. 402, a3)

**It is like elephants and horses who are stubborn and uncontrollable, who can only be disciplined by making them suffer to the bone** (MR, p. 154) (K: there are five kinds of horses: 1. [the kind that] submits immediately just by glimpsing the whip; 2.[the kind that] submits only upon being whipped; 3. [the kind that] submits only when hit on the coat with sharp spurs; 4. [the kind that] submits after being hit to the muscles; 5. [the kind that] submits after being hit to the bones). The predisposition of beings is also of five [different] kinds: 1. Some beings awake only by realizing the impermanence of other people's lives; 2. Some awake by realizing the impermanence of their friends' lives; 3. Some awake by realizing the impermanence of their brothers' and relatives' lives; 4. Some awake by realizing the impermanence of their parent's lives; 5. Some awake by realizing the impermanence of their own life, after having gone through a great deal of suffering and having been severely admonished)

In all the cases related above the explanation of categories is inessential for the understanding of the text and is meant to expand on the sūtra relating some additional information to the audience. Sometimes, like in the last quote, it serves to give more depth to a certain image or metaphor that is used in the text.

#### 1.2.2.4 References to Indian society and cultural background

Another important set of information provided by Kumārajīva when expanding on the text is related to the Indian cultural background, including social organization, traditions and folklore, politics and even some botanic and medical data. No doubt, before Kumārajīva's arrival in Chang'an the Chinese Buddhists had a very vague and approximate idea of the Indian *milieu* in which Buddhism as a religion and a way of life arose and developed; thanks to his mastery of the Chinese language and his vast erudition, the Kuchean translator was able to introduce them to the richness and complexities of Indian civilization, thus greatly contributing to fill this knowledge gap.

As a matter of fact, Kumārajīva appears to be deeply aware of the fact that it would have been impossible to transmit the Buddhist religion without contextualizing its teachings and practices into a broader cultural background. The adoption of such culture-oriented approach is one of the main features of Kumārajīva's exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and it surely led to a substantial advance in the knowledge of the Indian lore by the Chinese Buddhists.

Many of the commentarial entries dealing with this topic are introduced by the expression “in India...” (*Tianzhu* 天竺), or by a more general “in the foreign country...” (*waiguo* 外國); the information is sometimes given by Kumārajīva himself and sometimes related instead by Sengzhao or Daosheng who evidently heard it from the master.

Listening to Kumārajīva's explanations the monks and laymen of the audience discovered that, unlike in Chinese society, “in India the sons were named after their mother's name”. That is for example the case of Śāriputra, where “Śāri” is the mother's name and “putra” means son.<sup>286</sup> They also learned about the caste system. They knew that “[“**Kṣatriya**” 剎利, the caste of the warriors/kings] in Sanskrit has two meanings: ‘tough’ and ‘irascible’. It means that these men have great strength and are capable of great anger. They endure hardships, are strong and hard to

<sup>286</sup> Cf. Sengzhao's comment in chapt. 3: **肇** [舍利弗] … “舍利” 其母名；“弗” 秦言子。天竺多以母名名子《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈弟子品 3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 344, a14-15)



subdue. For this reason they bear this ‘clan (=caste) name’<sup>287</sup>. Elsewhere Sengzhao relates some more details adding that “the Kṣatriyas are the ruling clan, in Chinese [their name] means ‘land owners’. At the beginning of the kalpa men fed themselves with earth-sap<sup>288</sup>, then they changed it to wild polished rice. Afterwards men’s feelings became gradually corrupt, each one cultivated the earth by himself [and some started to steal from the others]. So they established virtuous men who divided the land into equal parts [and guarded them punishing the thieves]. This was the beginning of kingship. Hence, they passed down from one generation to the other this clan name. They were honourable and unrestrained, often violent, strong-willed and not inclined to compromises<sup>289</sup>”.

As to the Brahmanic caste, the Chinese learnt that “[the Brahmins] are of vast erudition and they pursue the heterodox path. They rely on wisdom, and are proud and carefree<sup>290</sup>; “this clan (=caste) has its own authoritative texts (*jingshu* 經書) which are passed down through generations. The study of the Way (*daoxue* 道學) is their duty. They may live at home or leave [and become renunciants]. In practicing asceticism they mostly rely upon their own methods/techniques (*daoshu* 道術). [They are] arrogant people.”<sup>291</sup>

The Chinese also knew about the everyday life in the city of Vaiśālī at the times when Vimalakīrti’s story was set. The city was situated amidst a vast lush expanse where rice was cultivated<sup>292</sup>. Buddhism was well developed: “in the proximity of the city there was a park and amidst the woods a pond was found named *Markaṭa hrada*. The park included a monastery which was one of the three vihāras of Vaiśālī”<sup>293</sup>.

The city bustled with people and activity: merchants “concluded business deals” 治生諧偶 and people enjoyed themselves in gambling houses 博奕, theatres 戲處 and wine shops 酒肆. There were also brothels 姪舍, and Sengzhao explains that “the lascivious men had set up separate red-

<sup>287</sup> 若在刹利，刹利中尊（什曰：梵音中含二義：一，言忍辱；二，言瞋恚。言此人有大力勢，能大瞋恚。忍受苦痛，剛強難伏。因以為姓也）《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, b7-10）

<sup>288</sup> *Diwei* 地味 (earth-sap) corresponds to the Sanskrit *prthivī-parpaṭaka*, *parpaṭaka* and is known in translated Buddhist texts also as 地薄餅, 地皮餅, 地皮 and 地肥. Cf. the following passages relating the features of this mythical food which is described as resembling to milk cream and tasting like honey or heavenly sweet dew: 「有自然地味，猶如醍醐，色如生酥，味甜如蜜。」《釋迦譜》卷 1（CBETA, T50, no. 2040, p. 1, b19-20）；「時此大地便有自然地味，色香美味皆悉具足，如天甘露等無有異。」《摩訶僧祇律》卷 1（CBETA, T22, no. 1425, p. 229, c12-14）；「地味便生，如天甘露。」《摩訶僧祇律》卷 2（CBETA, T22, no. 1425, p. 239, b23）。

<sup>289</sup> 教以忍辱（肇曰：“刹利”王種也。秦言“田主”。劫初人食地味。轉食自然粳米。後人情漸偽，各有封殖。遂立有德，處平，分田。此王者之始也。故相承為名焉。其尊貴、自在。多強暴、決意，不能忍和也）《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, b11-15）。This information derives from the *Discourse on What is Primary* (*Aggañña-sutta*), N. 27 of the *Dīgha Nikaya* (D III 80-98) (for an English translation of this text see Collins 1993). Chinese versions of the same mythical events narrated here are found in the *Dīrgha Āgama* 長阿含經 [T1] translated by Buddhayaśas 佛陀耶舍 and Zhu Fonian 竺佛念, and the *Mahā-sammata-raja* 《眾許摩訶帝經》[T191] translated by Faxian 法顯; the additions made in brackets in my English translation are based on the exposition found in such texts.

<sup>290</sup> 「什曰。廣學問求邪道。自恃智慧驕慢自在 [...]」《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, b16-17）

<sup>291</sup> 肇曰。[...] 其種別有經書，世世相承，以道學為業。或在家或出家。苦行，多恃己道術。自我慢人也）《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, b16-17）。The reference to the Brahmins’ arrogance is related to the passage of the sūtra text commented upon which reads “when he (=Vimalakīrti) was among brahmins, as the most honored among brahmins he eliminated their arrogance”.

<sup>292</sup> Cf. Kumārajīva and Sengzhao’s comments explaining the meaning of the name “Vaiśālī”: K: “Vai” means “[land] suitable for [setting up] rice fields”. “Śālī” means “vast”. Its land is a flat and vast adorned [expanse]; SZ: Vaiśālī is the name of a kingdom. [This word] in Chinese means “vast and adorned”. Its land is flat, vast and adorned, hence the name 「什曰。據佛所在方也。毘言稻土之所宜也。耶離言廣嚴。其地平廣莊嚴。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 328, a26-29）

<sup>293</sup> 「什曰。近毘耶離有園林。林中有水。水名獼猴池。園林中有僧房。是毘耶離三精舍之一也。[...]」《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 352, c21-23）

light districts to which those bodhisattvas who were still beginners didn't even cast a glance and only a great man (*i.e.* an advanced bodhisattva) [like Vimalakīrti] could instead conform to their lust and then show them their faults”<sup>294</sup>.

In the city there were also schools 學堂 where children were taught<sup>295</sup> and debate halls 講論處 where spokesmen of different doctrines challenged each other in debate. In fact, during those times “there were in India many different [philosophical] sects, each one claiming to be superior to the others. Hence, that kingdom set up a separate discussion-hall for the purpose of stating which one was the most valuable. Those who wanted to expose their doctrine gathered the crowds by the sound of drums, then they [all] went to the hall for debating [with their opponents]. The winner was [considered] the master while the loser was [considered his] disciple”<sup>296</sup>.

As to the political administration, “that city had no king and there were five hundred householders who dealt together with the administrative matters”<sup>297</sup>. Those householders 居士 or “white-robed” 白衣 were extremely wealthy<sup>298</sup> and enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle being served by “subordinates” 眷屬 and “wearing richly decorated clothing” 服寶飾. Their rich income often made them greedy, since “the more riches they accumulated the deeper their greed and attachment became”<sup>299</sup>. Kumārajīva also explains that “before going to bed the noblemen [used to] give orders to the musicians [so that] when the day was dawning they softly played [a delightful] music [listening to which] they would wake up”<sup>300</sup>.

For what regards the administration of justice, Sengzhao explains that “in the foreign country all the cities establish an elder, virtuous person to act as magistrate. He settles disputes at the city level”<sup>301</sup>. The term *sanlao* 三老 seems to be used here as a general name indicating a person belonging to one of the three stages of old age (presumably the 50s, 60s and 70s), however it clearly recalls the proper name *Sanlao* 三老, an official position in the Chinese administrative system established since the Qin-Han dynasties. The *Sanlao* was “a man of good character more than 50 years old, responsible for providing moral leadership and discipline”<sup>302</sup>, and thus it was understood by Zhanran 湛然 (711 - 782) in his *Concise annotations on the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* 維摩經略疏 (“In the foreign country a virtuous person is put in charge to act as *Sanlao* and enforce

<sup>294</sup> SZ: In the foreign country the lascivious men set [red-light] districts separate [from the residential areas]. Those bodhisattvas who are still beginners don't even cast a glance [to those places]. The great man instead conforms to their lust and shows them their faults” 肇曰。外國姪人別立聚落。凡豫士之流，目不暫顧。而大士同其欲，然後示其過也。《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, a21-23)

<sup>295</sup> Cf. 肇曰。學堂，童蒙書學堂也。《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, a7)

<sup>296</sup> 肇曰。天竺多諸異道，各言己勝。故其國別立論堂，欲辯其優劣。欲明己道者，則聲鼓集眾，詣堂求論。勝者為師，負者為資[...]《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 339, c29-p. 340, a3)

<sup>297</sup> 什曰。彼國無王。唯五百居士，共治國政[...]。Cf. also Sengzhao's comment: 肇曰。毘耶離國無有君王。唯有五百長者，共理國事[...]《注維摩詰經》卷8〈香積佛品10〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 401, a1-4)

<sup>298</sup> Cf. Kumārajīva's comment: “In the foreign country the white-robed who possess great riches are called ‘householders’” 什曰。外國白衣多財富樂 (read with variant -) 者，名為居士。《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, b3-4)

<sup>299</sup> 肇曰。[...] 寶貨彌殖，故貪著彌深。《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, b5-6)

<sup>300</sup> 什曰。[...] [外國貴人] 眠時要先勅樂人，明相出時，微奏樂音，然後乃覺。《注維摩詰經》卷7〈佛道品8〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 395, a2-3)

<sup>301</sup> 肇曰。外國諸部曲 (read with variant 國) 皆立三老、有德者為執法人。以決鄉訟 [...]《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 339, c18-19)

<sup>302</sup> Cf. the definition of *Sanlao* 三老 provided in Hucker 1985 (p. 399): “Qin-Han. lit. the three stages of old age, presumably the 50s, 60s, and 70s; hence someone in these age groups. **Elder**, one of three appointees from among a resident population in the quasiofficial sub-district (*xian* 縣) administration of a Township (*xiang* 鄉); normally a man of good character more than 50 years old, responsible for providing moral leadership and discipline. From among the Township Elders, one was commonly designated District Elder (*xian sanlao* 縣三老); and at least in Later Han there were some commandery (*jun* 郡) Elders presumably chosen from among the District Elders

the law of the state”<sup>303</sup>) and later on by Zhiyuan 智圓 (976 - 1022) in his *Weimojing lüeshu chuiyu ji* 維摩經略疏垂裕記 (“[my] present master says [this means] ‘to enforce the law of the state’, [whereas] Sengzhao [had previously] said ‘settle disputes on the city level’. There is little difference between the two. In our country during the Han times every city established a *Sanlao*”<sup>304</sup>).

There were palaces in Vaiśālī with many palace maids; they were supervised by a “Palace Manager” 內官. As Kumārajīva explains: “unlike the nowadays [Chinese] “Palace Manager” (which was usually an eunuch), according to the foreign customs a virtuous elder whose family has been upright for [various] generations<sup>305</sup> is chosen to cover this position”<sup>306</sup>.

In the city great charity assemblies 大施會 (=無遮大會) were held. Kumārajīva explains that “great charity assemblies are of two kinds: one in which [goods] are offered in great quantity without rituals being required; and another one in which the offering is made together with all kinds of rituals and sacrifices which are prescribed in the authoritative books of the heterodox sects”<sup>307</sup>. The proceedings are described in detail by Sengzaho, who comments: “this is how the great charity assembly is held in India: in the father’s [ancestral] house the four doors are opened and a banner is hoisted to inform the people. All those in need [then] reach the house and for seven days everything is given even at the risk of squandering all the family riches in order to pursue the Brahmin happiness (Skt. *brāhma-puṇya*)”<sup>308</sup>; and Daosheng adds that “the brahman rule states that they make sacrifices to Brahma for seven days; they make magnanimous offerings [to the people] in the hope of being reborn in Brahma’s heavens”<sup>309</sup>.

Zhanran adds further information on this topic relating an “ancient explanation from the Chang’an region” 關河舊解<sup>310</sup>: “‘father’s house’ means ‘abode where the ancestors are venerated’”<sup>311</sup>. “As to [the sentence] ‘hold a charity assembly’, the old Chang’an exegesis says: ‘his ancestors (i.e. the ancestors of the elder’s son Good Virtue mentioned in the sūtra) [held] heterodox views, and for generations always practiced heterodox sacrifices: in the minor sacrifices a goat was offered, in the medium ones a cow was slaughtered and in the major ones a human was offered. Having undergone a positive civilizing influence, they quit those heterodox sacrifices and were exhorted to practice the correct doctrine and to make proper offerings (Skr. *dāna*). Their clan is very rich and owns all the four necessities 四事 (i.e. clothing 衣服, victuals

<sup>303</sup> 「外國立有德者，以為三老，秉持國法。」《維摩經略疏》卷 3〈方便品 2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1778, p. 600, c23-24)

<sup>304</sup> 「今師云：『持國法』。肇云：『決鄉訟』。高下小異耳。此方，漢世鄉邑，各立三老。」《維摩經略疏垂裕記》卷 4〈方便品 2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1779, p. 761, c14-15)

<sup>305</sup> 什曰。非如今內官也，外國法，取歷世忠良耆長有德用為內官[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, b25-27)

<sup>306</sup> In his comment Zhanran 湛然 adds some more details about this custom: “according to the foreign custom a virtuous elder whose family had been upright for seven generations was taken as Palace Manager. He was trusted to enter the palace and manage internal affairs, being reliable and discrete” 外國國法，以七世不邪行、有德者，以為內官。委信入宮，整理內事，以為心祕」《維摩經略疏》卷 3〈方便品 2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1778, p. 601, c1-3)

<sup>307</sup> 什曰。大施會有二種：一，不用禮法 (Skr. *nīti* = offering)但廣布施。二，用外道經書種種禮法祭祀兼行大施。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 367, c18-20)

<sup>308</sup> (肇曰。天竺大施會法：於父舍開四門，立高幢，告天下。諸有所須，皆詣其舍。於七日中傾家而施，以求梵福 [...] )《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 368, a5-7)

<sup>309</sup> 生曰。婆羅門法，七日祀梵天。行大施，期生彼也。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 367, c20-23)

<sup>310</sup> In his annotations on Zhanran’s commentary, the Song monk Zhiyuan 智圓 (976 - 1022) explains the expression “ancient explanation from the Chang’an region” (*Guanhe jiu jie* 關河舊解) as the exegesis of the Kumārajīva’s school (see the following passages: 「關河舊解者，謂關中河西諸師也」《維摩經略疏垂裕記》卷 7〈菩薩品 4〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1779, p. 807, a12); 「關河解者。即關中河西諸師。謂羅什、僧肇等也。」《維摩經略疏垂裕記》卷 9〈觀眾生品 7〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1779, p. 831, a21-22)

<sup>311</sup> 「言父舍者，崇祖居處也」《維摩經略疏》卷 6〈菩薩品 4〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1778, p. 647, a6)

飲食, bedding 臥具, medicine (or herbs) 湯藥) in great abundance. When holding this charity assembly they make offerings to anybody [without discrimination, including] śramaṇas and laymen, [fellow] brahmins and adepts of other sects, the poor and the low-class people. Those who come are not kept at distance, and they are given [all] what they need. [The offering] lasts for seven entire days”<sup>312</sup>.

The *Commentary* bears witness of another pious practice of those times. Where the sūtra reads “[bodhisattvas comfort a bodhisattva who is ill] recalling the good actions he performed”<sup>313</sup>, Kumārajīva explains: “according to a custom of the foreign country, all the good deeds [performed by a man] from birth to death are recorded one by one. When [such man is] on his deathbed, the people around him read [those records] to him; [in this way] relying on those good deeds his heart won’t be sad or scared”<sup>314</sup>. And Sengzhao adds: “Mañjuśrī fears that the novice bodhisattvas would panic due to [the occurrence of] illness. So [Vimalakīrti] suggests to recall the good deeds they had performed in order to cheer them up”<sup>315</sup>.

In the core scene of the dramatic settings of the sūtra Vimalakīrti discusses the doctrine with bodhisattvas and gods while lying ill on his bed. The topic of illness is central in the text, and for this reason some interesting pieces of information related to Indian medical knowledge are provided in the *Commentary*<sup>316</sup>.

Illness is believed to derive from an unbalance; as Sengzhao explains it, “if one of the four elements is imbalanced then the one-hundred and one diseases arise. If all the four elements are imbalanced then the four-hundred and four diseases simultaneously arise. That’s why [the sūtra says that] the body is an agglomerate of calamities”<sup>317</sup>. And Kumārajīva clarifies that “the authoritative texts of the non-Buddhist sects only know about the ‘three peccant humors’ (*tridoṣa*)<sup>318</sup> [that cause illness]; they ignore [the potential dangers coming from] the element of the Earth. The Buddhist doctrine says [instead] that illness [depends on the] Four Elements (*i.e.* Earth, Water, Fire, Air (or Wind))<sup>319</sup>; [more precisely,] it derives from the imbalance<sup>320</sup> of the Four Elements, and such imbalance necessarily has a cause [which needs to be investigated]”<sup>321</sup>.

<sup>312</sup> 「設大施會者，關河舊解云：」其家祖父邪見，世世恒修邪祠。下祠用羊，中祠宰牛，上祠用人。善得教化，絕此邪祠，勸修正道，行真檀施。其家大富，四事豐饒。營斯大會，供養一切出家、在家、內道、外道及諸貧賤。來者無隔，供給所須。期滿七日」《維摩經略疏》卷 6〈菩薩品 4〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1778, p. 647, a6-12)

<sup>313</sup> 「憶所修福」《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 375, b27)

<sup>314</sup> 什曰。外國法，從生至終所作福業，一一書記。若命終時，傍人為說，令其恃福，心不憂畏也。《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 375, b27-29)

<sup>315</sup> 肇曰。恐新學菩薩為疾所亂。故勸憶所修福，悅其情也。《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 375, b29-c1)

<sup>316</sup> The topic of “Buddhism and healing” has been discussed (mainly on the basis of Chinese sources) by Deméville (Deméville 1985). In this work the scholar frequently quotes from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (cf. particularly pp. 26 - 28); however, T1775 (which provides some very interesting additional information on the topic) is rarely referred to (e.g. p. 28).

<sup>317</sup> 肇曰。一大增損，則百一病生；四大增損，則四百四病，同時俱作。故身為災聚也。《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 342, a28-b1)

<sup>318</sup> The *tridoṣa* (*san da bing* 三大病) - translated in Chinese also as *san neizai* 三內災 (“the three internal calamities”) and *san du* 三毒 (“the three poisons”) - are the pathological Wind (Skt. *vāta*, *vāyu*), Phlegm (or Cold) (Skt. *śleṣman*), and Bile (or Heat) (Skt. *pitta*) (cf. Deméville 1985, p. 65 - 71). On the *tridoṣa* in Chinese Buddhist translations and the problems involved in the translation of Indian medical terms in Chinese see also Salguero 2014, pp. 58 - 59 and 80 - 81.

<sup>319</sup> In Sanskrit respectively *Prthivī*, *Ap*, *Tejas* and *vāta* or *vāyu*.

<sup>320</sup> *Zengsun* 增損 (“imbalance”, lit. “augmentation or diminution”) stands for the Sanskrit *parivarta* (lit. “subversion”) (cf. Deméville 1985, p. 72)

<sup>321</sup> 什曰。外道經書唯知有三大病，不知地大。佛法中說四大病。病之所生，生於四大增損。四大增損，必自有因而然 [...]。《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 371, c20-23)



Demiéville has pointed out that the theory that illness derives from an unbalance of the Four Elements is found all through Buddhist literature and was very popular in Buddhist India<sup>322</sup>. To that theory - he says - is added that of the *tridoṣa* which “in Buddhist texts [...] - at least in Far East tradition - plays a minor role”<sup>323</sup>, to the point that “[it] seems never to have been well understood in China”<sup>324</sup>. Kumārajīva’s explanation shows that in the early fifth century he was *already* well aware of the existence of these two distinct diagnostic systems, the *tridoṣa* belonging to the extra-Buddhist medical tradition and the Four-Elements theory being instead distinctively Buddhist.<sup>325</sup>

Resorting to a well-established metaphor, the sūtra portrays the Buddha himself as a doctor or a healer<sup>326</sup> who tries to cure in all possible ways the illnesses of mankind, to the point that “when there are epidemics in the middle of a kalpa he manifests himself as medicinal plants. If someone takes [these herbs], they eradicate illness and eliminate the host of poisons” (MR, p. 139)<sup>327</sup>. Kumārajīva comments that “[in this way the Buddha] may heal their illness or let them go up [to heaven] with the immortals. So that he can convert them guiding them into the noble path. In the foreign country grow wonderful medicinal herbs. Some have shapes of men, some other of elephants or horses. As to those resembling elephants and horses, some ride them and fly away crossing the skies. And there are other medicinal herbs whose sight and smell are sufficient for being healed”<sup>328</sup>. Elsewhere, the Kuchean translator also says that “the gods hide all kinds of renowned medicinal [herbs] in the sea, they rub them using [the stones of the ten] precious mountains and produce the sweet dew which gives immortality; this is called ‘the elixir of immortality’. In the Buddhist doctrine it is the sweet dew of nirvāṇa that stops forever the [sufferings of] the Samsāric existence; [that] is the ‘true elixir of immortality’”<sup>329</sup>.

In other passages reference is made to fruits having curative properties, for example “the Amalaka fruit 菴摩勒果 (*Phyllanthus emblica*) is similar to the betel nut (*Areca catechu*), when

<sup>322</sup> “[...] when a disciple saluted his master in the morning he had to ask of him “Are your elements at peace?” [...] and the Chinese pilgrim I-tsing heard [this formula] in the monasteries of India even at the end of the seventh century” (Demiéville 1985, p. 65)

<sup>323</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66

<sup>324</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66

<sup>325</sup> On the significance of this fact cf. *Ibidem* p. 67: “the pilgrim I-tsing, at about the year 700, expounds a theory of ‘four humors’ or morbid states according to a medical text attributed to the Buddha himself, and to his exposition he appends the comment that according to the ‘vernacular’ or ‘lay’ nosology [of India], these humors are reducible to three: wind, bile and phlegm (cf. 「若依俗論病乃有其三種：謂風、熱、癰。重則與癰體同，不別彰其地大 (!)」 [T2125], p. 224, a15-16)). By ‘vernacular’ or ‘lay’, I-tsing evidently understands the extra-Buddhist medicine then current in India; it appears therefore that in his era Buddhists had taken note of a divergence between their own doctrine of pathology and that of brahmanical physicians, and had claimed a four-rooted pathogenesis as their own (the Greater Vehicle then authorized the study of medicine)”.

Demiéville also observes that “a quaternary classification of illnesses founded upon the pathology of the four *mahābhūta* [...] better corresponds to physiological and cosmological ideas familiar to all Buddhists” (*Ibidem*, p. 66); also, “the Buddhist theory of the four elements, all four pathogenic, offers analogies with the medical ideas of the Greeks that are so striking that one may wonder if they do not reflect a Hellenic influence” (*Ibidem*).

As to the two distinct diagnostic systems mentioned above, it is also important to stress the fact that “[...] there [is] little likelihood that a truly Buddhist medicine was ever opposed to āyurvedic medicine: one should not lose sight of the interdiction pronounced by the Lesser Vehicle upon medical studies. Nothing in India warrants a distinction between a “monastic medicine” and the medical tradition proper [...]” (p. 92).

<sup>326</sup> On Buddha as healer cf. *Ibidem*, p. 14 - 15.

<sup>327</sup> 劫中有疾疫，現作諸藥草。若有服之者，除病消眾毒。《維摩詰所說經》卷 2 〈佛道品 8〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 550, a19-21)

<sup>328</sup> 佛曰。或令除病，或得昇仙。因而化之，使入正道。外國有奇妙藥草。或似人形或似象馬形。似象馬者，有人乘之，徑凌虛而去。或但見聞此藥，眾病即消也。《注維摩詰經》卷 7 〈佛道品 8〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 395, c20-24)

<sup>329</sup> 佛曰：諸天以種種名藥著海中。以寶山摩之，令成甘露。食之得仙。名“不死藥”。佛法中以涅槃甘露令生死永斷。是“真不死藥”也。[...] 《注維摩詰經》卷 7 〈佛道品 8〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 395, a8-11)

eaten it eliminates [the diseases deriving from] the cold”<sup>330</sup>; the harītakī 訶梨勒果 (yellow Myrobalan, *Terminalia Chebula*) have a laxative effect and can be used for curing small malaises<sup>331</sup>.

### 1.2.2.5 Background information on religious figures and anecdotes

In his exegesis Kumārajīva usually supplies some background information on the characters which are mentioned in the text, be they Buddhist or non-Buddhist, sometimes in a very concise way (as it happens for example with Mahāmaudgalyāyana 大目犍連, Mahākātyāyana 摩訶迦旃延, Makarin Gośālīputra 末伽梨拘賒梨子 etc.<sup>332</sup>), sometimes providing a whole essential biography (for example in the case of Rāhula 羅睺羅 in chapt. 3<sup>333</sup>), sometimes focusing on a single particularly famous event. For example in chapter 3, when Mahākāśyapa is mentioned, the following narrative digression is made, where the great disciple’s virtues of mercy and compassion (which are relevant in the sūtra text<sup>334</sup>) are particularly emphasized:

大迦葉 (什) 曰。先佛出家。第一頭陀者也。昔一時從山中出，形體垢膩，著龜弊衣，來詣佛所。諸比丘見之，起輕賤意。佛欲除諸比丘輕慢心，故讚言：“善來迦葉！”即分床坐。迦葉辭曰：“佛為大師，我為弟子。云何共坐？”佛言：“我禪定解脫、智慧三昧、大慈大悲，教化眾生。汝亦如是。有何差別？”諸比丘聞已，發希有心，咸興恭敬。迦葉聞是已，常學佛行。慈悲救濟苦人。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 347, c7-15)

**Mahākāśyapa** (K: He had become a *śramaṇa* before the Buddha [did so], and excelled in the ascetic practices (*dhūta*). Once he came out of the mountains and, dirty and dressed in rags [as he was], went to see the Buddha. Upon seeing him, [the Buddha’s] disciples felt contempt for him. But the Buddha, wanting to eradicate their arrogance, honored him saying: “*Svāgata*”<sup>335</sup>

<sup>330</sup> 肇曰。菴摩勒果形似檳榔，食之除風冷[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 354, c19-20). Cf. the detailed description of this fruit provided by Huilin 慧琳:「阿末羅果 (滿鉢反，舊曰“菴摩羅果”，亦名“阿磨勒果”。其葉似棗，其花白小果，如胡桃。其味酸而且甜。可入藥用。經中言：“如觀掌中菴摩勒果”是)。」《一切經音義》卷 13 (CBETA, T54, no. 2128, p. 386, c15-16)

<sup>331</sup> See Kumārajīva’s comment: “There was an *arhat* named Vakkula who in the past was a medicine vendor. He said to the monks who were in summer retreat: ‘If somebody needs a medicine he can come and get it from me.’ But nobody needed it. Only a monk who had a small malaise got from him a harītakī fruit [...]” (什) 曰。有羅漢名薄拘羅。往昔為賣藥師。語夏安居僧言：“若有須藥就我取之。”眾竟無所須。唯一比丘小病受一訶梨勒果[...]。《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 359, b19-22)

<sup>332</sup> 「大目犍連。(什) 曰。目連婆羅門姓也。名俱律陀。拘律陀樹神名也。以求神得故因以為名。生便有大智慧故名大目犍連。神足第一者也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 345, b18-21); 「摩訶迦旃延。(什) 曰。南天竺婆羅門姓也。善解契經者也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 353, b2-3); 「末伽梨拘賒梨子。(什) 曰。末伽梨字也。拘賒梨是其母也。其人起見云。眾生罪垢無因無緣也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 350, c21-23)

<sup>333</sup> Cf. T1775, p. 356, c17-p. 357, a24

<sup>334</sup> “Vimalakīrti came and said to me ‘O Mahākāśyapa, you have the mind of mercy and compassion but are unable [to apply it] universally’ 「維摩詰來謂我言：『唯，大迦葉！有慈悲心而不能普』《維摩詰所說經》卷 1〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 540, a27-28)

<sup>335</sup> *Svāgata* (lit. *welcome!*). But in specific cases, when the Buddha addressed someone with such words it meant that, having fulfilled the conditions, such person could receive the complete rules (*juzu jie* 具足戒, Skt. *susumāpta-śīla*) and enter the order. This was one of the ten ways in which one could receive the rules (十種得戒緣); it was known as *shanlai de* 善來得 and was used only by the Buddha in person. Cf. the following passage from the *Ekottarikāgama* in which Mahākāśyapa is said to have received the complete rules in such way: 「諸佛常法，若稱：『善來，比丘！』便成沙門。是時，世尊告迦葉曰：『善來，比丘！此法微妙，善修梵行。』是時，迦葉及五百弟子所著衣裳，盡變作 (read with variant 成) 袈裟，頭髮自落，如似剃髮，以經七日。是時，迦葉學術之具及於呪術，盡投水中。」《增壹阿含經》卷 15〈高幢品 24〉 (CBETA, T02, no. 125, p. 621, c28-p. 622, a4). See also 「三者，善來得戒者。前人背惡歸宗。如來應根發唱，唱必有益。應時發戒，故曰“善來僧”也。」《律抄》卷 1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2794, p. 686, a7-9). According to T1462 during the Buddha’s

Kāśyapa!” and shared his mat with him. Kāśyapa refused [such privilege] by saying: “[You,] the Buddha, are a great master and I am [but] a disciple. How could we possibly sit together?” The Buddha said: “[By means of] meditation and emancipation, wisdom and *samādhi*, great mercy and compassion, I teach and convert the beings; and you do the same. What difference is there [between you and me]?” The disciples listened to that in astonishment and a feeling of deference [for Kāśyapa] arose in them. Having heard those words, Kāśyapa constantly perfected himself in the Buddhist practice, with mercy and compassion he helped the suffering beings [...])<sup>336</sup>

Kumārajīva also relates many anecdotes, in which Buddhist figures often act as main characters. Written in a fine narrative style, they are meant to clarify the sūtra text by providing a dramatized explanation of an abstract formulation. For example, when in chapter 2 Vimalakīrti is praised for “having an unhindered eloquence and disporting in the supernatural powers”<sup>337</sup>, Kumārajīva in his comment first establishes a connection between “eloquence” and “supernatural powers” which is not explicitly made in the text, and then relates an anecdote having the great philosopher Nāgārjuna as protagonist which vividly illustrates it:

「什曰。因神通，廣其化功。亦以神通力證其辯才。如龍樹與外道論議。外道問曰：‘天今何作？’。答曰：‘天今與阿修羅戰’。復問：‘此何以證？’菩薩即為現證。應時<sup>338</sup>摧戈、折刃、阿脩身首從空中而墜落。又見天與阿脩羅於虛空中列陣相對。外道見證已，乃伏其辯才。神通證辯，類如此也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 339, a3-9)

K: [Vimalakīrti] uses his supernatural powers for increasing his capacity of converting [the beings]. Also, he uses such powers for validating his eloquence, as Nāgārjuna [once] did [when] debating with [the king of Southern India who was] a follower of the heterodox doctrines. [In that occasion] that heretic asked him: “What are the *devas* now doing?” [The other] answered: “The *devas* are fighting against the *asuras*”. [The king] asked again: “How would you prove [such statement]?” The bodhisattva [Nāgārjuna] then manifested to him the proof: immediately axes in pieces and broken blades, bodies and heads of *asuras* fell down from heaven. [The king and the ten thousand brahmins gathered at his court] could also see the [armies of] *devas* and *asuras* lined up facing each other in the skies”. Having seen the proofs [that Nāgārjuna was saying the truth], those believers of the heterodox doctrines submitted to his eloquence. [Vimalakīrti’s] use of the supernatural powers for validating his eloquence is of a similar kind<sup>339</sup>.

Another anecdote, this time having Aśvaghōṣa<sup>340</sup> as protagonist, is told in chapter 9 in order to better illustrate the meaning of Vimalakīrti’s silence, which represents the peak of the philosophical climax in which gods and bodhisattvas give in turn their explanation of the teaching of non-duality:

lifetime the number of believers who had received the complete rules in this way amounted to 1341 (see p. 718, a15-17).


<sup>336</sup> Other versions of this story can be found in T196, p. 161, a17-b20; T100, p. 416, c7-p. 417, a22; T99, p. 302, a1-b1 and T657, p. 127, b13-p. 128, c23.

<sup>337</sup> 「辯才無閼，[...] 遊戲神通。」《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 339, a1-3)

<sup>338</sup> 應時：（副）用在動詞前，表示動作、行為隨即發生，可譯作“立即”、“立刻”（Dong Zhiqiao and Cai Jinghao 1994）

<sup>339</sup> A larger version of the same story is related in the *Biography of the bodhisattva Nāgārjuna* 龍樹菩薩傳 [T2047a] translated by Kumārajīva (cf. *Op. cit.*, p. 185, a4-28); in such text Nāgārjuna is said to have used the expedient of validating his eloquence by means of the supernatural powers for converting the “king of Southern India” 南天竺王 and the ten thousand brahmins gathered at his court to the Buddhist faith. My reading of the passage in T1775 is based upon T2047a from which it most probably derives.

<sup>340</sup> On the Chinese re-elaboration of figures of Indian Buddhist patriarchs like Nāgārjuna and Aśvaghōṣa see Young 2015.

於是文殊師利問維摩詰：“我等各自說已，仁者當說，何等是菩薩入不二法門”。時維摩詰默然無言（曰。如佛泥洹後六百年有一人。年六十出家。未幾時頌三藏都盡，次作三藏論議。作論已，思惟言：“佛法中復有何事？唯有禪法，我當行之”。於是受禪法，自作要誓：“若不得道、不具一切禪定功德，終不寢息、脇不著地”。因名脇比丘。少時得成阿羅漢，具三明六通，有大辯才，善能論議。有外道師，名曰馬鳴。利根智慧，一切經書，皆悉明練，亦有大辯才。能破一切論議。聞脇比丘名，將<sup>341</sup>諸弟子往到其所。唱言：“一切論議，悉皆可破。若我不能破汝言論，當斬首謝屈”。脇比丘聞是論，默然不言。馬鳴即生憍慢：“此人徒有空名，實無所知”。與其弟子捨之而去。中路思惟已，語弟子言：“此人有甚深智慧，我墮負處”。弟子怪而問曰：“云何爾？”。答曰：“我言‘一切語言可破’，即是自破。彼不言則無所破”。即還到其所，語脇比丘言：“我墮負處，則是愚癡。愚癡之頭，非我所須，汝便斬之。若不斬我，我當自斬”。脇比丘言：“不斬汝頭，當斬汝結髮。比於世間，與死無異”。即下髮為脇比丘作弟子。智慧辯才，世無及者。廣造經論，大弘佛法。時人謂之為第二佛。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 8〈入不二法門品 9〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 399, b3-27)

**Mañjuśrī then asked Vimalakīrti, “We have each made our own explanations. Sir, you should explain how the bodhisattva enters the Dharma gate of non-duality.” At this point Vimalakīrti was silent, saying nothing** (MR, p. 148) (K: For example, six hundred years after the Buddha [had entered] nirvāṇa there was a man who left home [to become a monk] at the age of sixty. In a short time he memorized the three partitions [of the Buddhist Canon] and then composed commentaries on each of them. Having done so, he thought: “Is there anything else in the Buddhist doctrine [that I should learn]?” Only meditation is left, then I will practice it!” So he received the instructions on the meditative practices and solemnly vowed to himself: “Shall I not sleep and shall my hips (lit. side, flank) not touch the floor till I obtain enlightenment and collect all the merits deriving from meditation”. For this reason he was called *Hip-monk*. He soon achieved the condition of *arhat*, gained the three insights and the six supernatural powers, and acquired great rhetoric skills [which enabled him] to debate with great mastery. There was a *tīrthaka* (non-Buddhist) master named Aśvaghoṣa who was clever and smart; he mastered all the scriptures and was also a skilled debater able to confute every theory. Having heard about Hip-monk, he went to see him with his disciples. [Once arrived] he declared: “I can confute any theory. If I do not succeed in confuting your arguments may I be beheaded in sign of defeat”. Hip-monk listened to this but kept silent and did not give any answer. Aśvaghoṣa then got haughty and said: “This man has only an undeserved reputation. He actually doesn’t know anything”. So he abandoned him and left with his disciples. [However, afterwards] along the way he thought about it, and said to the disciples: “This man is extraordinarily intelligent, I have [actually] been defeated by him”. The disciples asked with surprise: “Why is it so?”. He said: “When I said that any proposition could be confuted, I was actually confuting my own saying. [As to him,] he didn’t speak, so he didn’t incur in any confutation”. Hence, he went back and said to Hip-monk: “I’ve been defeated, thus I’m [clearly] an ignorant. This ignorant head won’t be of any help to me, so please cut it off. If you don’t do that, I’ll do it myself”. Hip-monk said: “I will not cut off your head, but instead your hair (i.e. I’ll make you a renunciant). In this way you’ll be dead to the world”. So his hair was shaved and he became Hip-monk’s disciple. He [acquired] such a great intelligence and eloquence that nobody could match him. He extensively produced sūtras and śāstras and greatly spread the Buddhist doctrine. His contemporaries called him “the second Buddha” [...])

The fact that anecdotes like this are widely used in the *Commentary* not only for illustrating some secondary matters but also for explaining many central Buddhist conceptions like for example the absence of self, skill in means *etc.* and are found in the exegesis of crucial points of the text (as it happens with the last quote) accounts for the importance attributed by Kumārajīva to this “exegetical device” which, as a matter of fact, is by no means typical of the Chinese

<sup>341</sup> 將：(2) 介紹動作涉及的對象，可譯作“跟”、“同”等。[...] “將”的這一用法，當由表“帶領”義的動詞“將”引申、虛化而來的 (Dong Zhiqiao and Cai Jinghao 1994)



exegetical tradition<sup>342</sup> and has been “imported” from the Indian and Central-Asian *milieu* and then adapted to the new context of the translation-lecture.

#### 1.2.2.6 Parables, allegorical stories and similes

Besides biographical information and anecdotes, in his commentary Kumārajīva shows a whole repertoire of Buddhist parables and allegorical stories, which constitute together a narrative body of fine literary quality. This kind of dramatized exegetical technique plays a very important role in the Kuchean master’s explanation of the sūtra and is not less important than his more strictly “philosophical” elucidations. The impression is that the simultaneous use of both approaches is meant to make the exposition accessible to listeners with very different levels of education, from the more cultured *literati* to the barely literate devotees.

When the sūtra text depicts Vimalakīrti as “entering the brothels and revealing the transgressions [that arise from] desire”<sup>343</sup>, Kumārajīva relates a parable in which the great bodhisattva Mañjuśrī uses various expedients in order to show a prostitute and his client the downsides of sexual desire and to guide them into the Buddhist path:

什曰。外國有一女人，身體金色。有長者子，名達暮多羅。以千兩金，要入竹林。同載而去。文殊師利於中道變身為白衣，身著寶衣，衣甚嚴好。女人見之，貪心內發。文殊言：“汝欲得衣者，當發菩提心”。女曰：“何等為菩提心？”答曰：“汝身是也”。問曰：“云何是？”答曰：“菩提性空，汝身亦空。以此故是”。此女曾於迦葉佛所宿殖善本，修智慧。聞是說，即得無生法忍。得無生法忍已，將示欲之過。還，與長者子入竹林。入林中已，自現身死，臃脹臭爛。長者子見已，甚大怖畏，往詣佛所。佛為說法，亦得法忍。示欲之過，有如是利益也！《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, a9–21）

K: In the foreign country (=India) there was a woman with a golden body. [And] there was an elder’s son whose name was Dharmottara (?) who gave her a thousand *liang* of gold, and invited her to enter the bamboo groove [and lie with him]. They left on the same carriage. Mañjuśrī appeared to them along the way transformed into a householder wearing a precious, magnificent dress. [When] the woman saw it, the greed arose in her.

Mañjuśrī said: “If you want to have my dress you must generate the intention to achieve enlightenment”. She asked: “What is the intention to achieve enlightenment?” He answered: “It is your body”. “Why is it so?” she asked [again]. “The nature of enlightenment is empty and your body is empty as well. This is the reason”, he replied.

Previously, during the age of Kāśyapa Buddha<sup>344</sup>, this woman had planted the good roots and had progressed in wisdom, so that [only by] hearing this answer she obtained the forbearance of the non-arising. Then she wanted to show [her partner] the transgressions [that arise from sexual] desire”: she went back and entered the bamboo groove with the elder’s son, then she manifested herself as a dead body, swollen and putrid. At that sight the elder’s son was terrified and went where the Buddha was. The Buddha explained him the doctrine and he too achieved the forbearance of the non-arising. [Indeed,] to show the transgressions [that arise from sexual] desire brings about such great benefits.

The *Commentary* also includes numerous allegorical stories which usually aim at facilitating the understanding of certain expressions used in the text. However, it is not infrequent that they are just inspired (or, we might say, triggered) by certain words of the sūtra text and maintain a more loose connection to it. This is for example the case of the following story which serves to

<sup>342</sup> Stories and anecdotes are no doubt frequently used in the Chinese philosophical milieu; however, they are very rarely employed in commentaries as exegetical devices (cf. on this Lo 2002, p. 97, note 29)

<sup>343</sup> 「入諸婬舍，示欲之過。」《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 340, a9）

<sup>344</sup> Kāśyapa Buddha is the third Buddha of the present aeon, the one immediately preceding Gautama Buddha.

explain the sentence “this body is like a dry well in a desolated land, [pressed by age]”<sup>345</sup>. The abandoned well which quickly dries up is a metaphor of the rapid decay of the physical body; however, Kumārajīva seems to have focused his attention on the image of the well and then elaborated a story centered on it which is not strictly related to the sūtra text:

什曰：[...] 昔有人有罪於王。其人怖罪逃走。王令醉象逐之。其人怖急，自投枯井。半井得一腐草，以手執之。下有惡龍，吐毒向之。傍有五毒蛇，復欲加害。二鼠嚙草，草復將斷。大象臨其上，復欲取之。其人危苦，極大恐怖。上有一樹。樹上時有蜜滴落其口中。以著味故而忘怖畏。丘井，生死也。醉象，無常也。毒龍，惡道也。五毒蛇，五陰也。腐草，命根也。黑白二鼠，白月黑月也。蜜滴，五欲樂也。得蜜滴而忘怖畏者，喻眾生得五欲蜜滴，不畏苦也。《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 342, b2-13)

K: [...] Once there was a man who committed *lese-majesty*. Fearing the punishment [he would incur], he escaped. The king ordered a demented elephant<sup>346</sup> to go chase him. Scared and panicked [as he was], this man threw himself into a dry well. While falling down he found some rotten grass [on the walls of the well] and grabbed it [remaining suspended]. Beneath him there were evil dragons spitting poison towards him. At his side, five snakes also wanted to harm him, [while] two mice were nibbling at the grass, which was [already] about to break. The big elephant was [already] over him and wanted to seize him. Such was the great danger and despair he found himself in! Above [the well] there was a tree with honey on it, which dropped down into his mouth. Enchanted by that flavor, he forgot about his terror.

The well represents saṃsāra, the demented elephant is the impermanence; the poisonous dragons are the evil destinies; the five poisonous snakes are the five *skandhas*; the rotten grass is man's lifespan (*jīvitendriya*); the two mice, one black and one white, are the waxing and waning of the moon (i.e. the passing of time); the honey drops are the pleasures deriving from the five senses; the oblivion of the terror after tasting the honey drops illustrates [the fact that] the beings forget their fears and pains when they obtain the honey of the pleasures deriving from the five senses.

As to the use of similes, it will suffice here to quote the following passage in which the false belief in the existence of the self is explained *more indico* with a series of no less than three such figures of speech:

什曰：[...] 眾生、神、主、我是一義耳。如一癡人行路，遇見遺匣，匣中有大（read with variant -）鏡。開匣視鏡，自見其影，謂是匣主。稽首歸謝，捨之而走。眾生入佛法藏，珍寶鏡中取相計我，棄之而去。亦復如是。亦如一盲人行道中，遇值國王子，堅抱不捨。須臾王官屬至，加極楚痛，強逼奪之，然後放捨。如邪見眾生於非我見我。無常苦至，隨緣散壞，乃知非我。亦復如是。如空中雲近之則無也。[...] 《注維摩詰經》卷 6〈觀眾生品 7〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 383, b23-c9)

The beings, the spirit, the host, the self: [these words] are equal in meaning.

1. Take as an example the case of a foolish person who finds on his way a box abandoned [by somebody]. [The box] has a mirror inside, and when he opens it and looks in, he sees his reflected image and believes that this is the owner of the box, so he bows and apologizes, then gets rid of it and goes away. The same happens to the beings: when they access the coffer containing the teachings of the Buddha, reflecting themselves in its precious mirror they cling to that image and believe in the existence of a self, so they get rid of the coffer and go away.

2. Take as another example a blind person who on his way walks into a prince; he seizes him firmly and does not let him go. [Then] in a short while the king's subordinates arrive, they

<sup>345</sup> 「是身如丘井 [為老所逼]」《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 342, b2) I translate this sentence in such way instead of “a well on a hill” (MR, p. 83) following Kumārajīva's explanation of the term, viz. 什曰：丘井，丘墟枯井也。

<sup>346</sup> In Buddhist writings the “demented elephant” 醉象 (an evil elephant who behaves in a crazy-like manner, as if it were drunk) is the allegory of a confused mind capable of causing great harm to other beings.

subjected him to a severe beating and try to forcefully snatch the prince out [of his hands]; only at this point [the blind person] lets him go. The same happens to the beings: having been [made blind] by the false views, they envision a self where there is no self; but then comes the suffering generated from impermanence, and according with conditions [the false image of a self] disintegrates. At this point they discover that that was not [a real] self.

3. It is similar to what happens with the clouds suspended in the sky: as soon as you come closer they vanish.

Most of the times the narrative digressions are clearly related to the text of the sūtra and serve to illustrate in a more vivid and dramatic manner a certain concept or practice. However, sometimes Kumārajīva seems to indulge in the pure pleasure of storytelling; for example, when the term *cakravartin* is mentioned in the text he launches himself into a description of the many weird ways in which some universal rulers were born. This matter, which is totally irrelevant for the understanding of the text and would also appear quite trivial in a Buddhist sermon, was evidently intended to catch the attention and amaze the Chinese audience:

捨轉輪王位 (什曰。轉輪王亦有不入胎者。如頂生王是也。昔轉輪王頂上生瘡。王患其痒痛。婆羅門欲以刀破之。王時怒曰：“云何以刀著大王頂上耶？”更有婆羅門，以藥塗之。至七日，頭瘡乃壞，視瘡中見有小兒。威相端正，取而養之，後遂為王。因從頂生，故名“頂生王”。或有從肩、臂、手、足等生。此皆從男女(read with variant -) 生也。[...]) 《注維摩詰經》卷3〈弟子品3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 357, b2-9)

[The Buddha] forsook the position of universal ruler (*cakravartin*) (MR, p. 94) (K: among the *cakravartins* some are found which were not conceived in the mother's womb, as for example the king *Mūrdhagata*. Once a *cakravartin* had an excrescence growing on his head which caused him a fastidious pain. A brahman wanted to incise it with a knife, but the king said in anger: "How you dare to place a knife on the king's head?". Another brahman spread an ointment on it and after seven days the excrescence broke and a baby was seen inside: he had a dignified and handsome appearance. [Then] he was raised [in the royal family] and afterwards became a king. Since he was born out of a head, he was called *Mūrdhagata*, "head-born".

There are also [*cakravartins*] who are born from shoulders, arms, hands or feet. In these cases they are all born out of males [...])

Far from being mere occasional exegetical expedients, the above-mentioned anecdotes, parables, allegorical stories and similes form a narrative body which constitutes a consistent part of Kumārajīva's exegesis. Prof. Yuet Keung Lo has pointed out how storytelling-based exegesis differs sharply from the Chinese traditional exegesis and argues, also on the basis of the *Xianyu jing* 賢愚經 (according to Sengyou, a record of what eight Chinese monks had observed and heard in Khotan 于闐, at the five-yearly assembly in the Great Community in the early decades of the fifth century<sup>347</sup>), that this teaching and proselytization style was popular in Central Asia in the third and fourth centuries. Kumārajīva might then have become acquainted with such style during his early years in Kucha and Kashgar. An interesting element supporting this view is found right in Kumārajīva's biography in *Gaoseng zhuan*: when back to his native Kucha after the years of his training abroad, the future translator was joined there by his former master Bandhudatta (first cousin of the king of Kashmir) and the two engaged in a heated debate over the correctness of the Mahāyāna's teaching of universal emptiness; such exchange is entirely characterized by allegorical stories reproducing in a dramatized fashion the respective philosophical positions (cf. *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], p. 331, a28-b10)<sup>348</sup>.

<sup>347</sup> Cf. *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], p. 67, c9-p. 68, a1. On this scripture see also Mair 1993.

<sup>348</sup> See Yuet Keung Lo's study on the storytelling features of Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* (Yuet Keung Lo 2002)

### 1.2.2.7 Philosophical explanations

Another fundamental component of Kumārajīva's exegesis is constituted by his philosophical explanations. Given the fact that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is substantially in tune with the master's own philosophical orientation, this material is likely to reflect the Kuchean master's own views (and indeed Tang Yongtong uses it when describing his philosophical thought<sup>349</sup>). However, it has to be reminded that the very nature of this work (i.e. it being a commentary) required that the exegete articulate his explanations along the lines of the sūtra itself (including its phrasing and philosophical discourse) being to some extent guided by it.

Let me briefly discuss some key philosophical explanations contained in Kumārajīva's *Commentary*.

#### a. The True Characteristic (*shixiang* 實相)

According to Kumārajīva, the *True Characteristic* (*shixiang* 實相) is no doubt the most fundamental conception explained throughout the sūtra. In his view, the very fact that a certain sūtra exposes this conception characterizes it as a “deep sūtra”, alias a Mahāyāna sūtra:

什曰。[...]若經中說實相，實相即是印。以實相印封此經，則為深經也。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 10 〈法供養品 13〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 415, b17-18)

If in a sūtra the True Characteristic is explained, [then] the True Characteristic is its seal. Since this sūtra is sealed with the seal of the True Characteristic, it is a “deep sūtra” (i.e. a Mahāyāna sūtra)

The True Characteristic is described as the One Truth (*yidi* 一諦), which is the absence of self-nature not only of the self but of all the elements of existence, and hence equals to emptiness. This is in turn the ultimate truth of Mahāyāna Buddhism:

諦是道場不誑世間故。(什曰。小乘中說四諦，大乘中說一諦。今言“諦”，是則一諦。一諦，實相也。[...]從一諦乃至諸法無我是諸法實相，即一諦中異句異味也。由此一諦故佛道得成。一諦即是佛因，故名“道場”也。)《注維摩詰經》卷 4 〈菩薩品 4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 364, c7-14)

**The Truth is the place of enlightenment, because of not misleading the world** (MR, p. 100) (K: In the Hīnayāna [they] speak about Four [Noble] Truths, [whereas] in the Mahāyāna [we] talk about the One Truth. The “Truth” which is now mentioned [in the text] is the One Truth, and the One Truth is the True Characteristic [of reality] [...] Following the One Truth one gets to [know] that the absence of self[-nature] of the dharmas is their True Characteristic, [and this is in turn] but a different explanation of the One Truth. It is because of this One Truth that the Buddhist path can be accomplished. The One Truth is the primary cause of enlightenment, that is why [in the text] it is called “place of enlightenment”)

In another important passage the True Characteristic is directly identified with the Bodhi (Enlightenment), or its true cause:

「寂滅是菩提滅諸相故。(什曰。菩提有三：所謂羅漢、緣覺、如來三人。漏盡、慧通、達無閼乃名“菩提”。此已下，歎菩提真解，妙同實相。欲擬心求解亦當如是。亦明菩提即是實相，以遣其著也。實相是菩提因，亦名菩提也。[...])《注維摩詰經》卷 4 〈菩薩品 4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 362, c18-22)

**Bodhi cannot be attained with the body, and it cannot be attained with the mind.**

**Extinction is *bodhi*, because of the extinction of the characteristics.** (MR, p. 98)

(K: The Bodhi is of three kinds, i.e. [the Bodhi of the] arhats, Śrāvakas and Tathāgatas. When flaws have come to an end, wisdom pervades [everything] and the comprehension is not

<sup>349</sup> See Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, pp. 236 - 242



obstructed, [this state] is called “Bodhi”. Further on [in the text *Vimalakīrti*] exclaims that “the true insight of the Bodhi marvelously identifies with the True Characteristic”. If one investigates it with his mind he will realize that it is exactly like that. [The text] also clarifies that the Bodhi is identical with the True Characteristic, by means of discarding the attachments [to all the discriminative views of the Bodhi]. The True Characteristic is the cause of the Bodhi, and [for this reason] it is also called “Bodhi” [...]

Keeping in mind the typical “osmotic relationship” between exegesis and translation during Kumārajīva’s era, it is not surprising at all that the term *shixiang* plays an important role in the translation of the scripture itself, where it is used with great frequency (8 occurrences, while only one is found in Xuanzang’s version and none in Zhi Qian’s). The choice of this term<sup>350</sup> sometimes turns rather prosaic passages into philosophically relevant statements, and sometimes even seems to constitute an addition to the text which finds no correspondence in the other two ancient translations available to us<sup>351</sup> - admitted, in both cases, that the underlying original is the same -. This phenomenon gives the clear impression that Kumārajīva is “orienting” the Chinese rendering of the text on the basis of his own philosophical agenda.<sup>352</sup> See as an example the following passage from chapt. 5:

「爾時佛告文殊師利：“汝行詣維摩詰問疾”。文殊師利白佛言：“世尊！彼上人者，難為酬對。深達實相，善說法要，辯才無滯，智慧無礙”」《維摩詰所說經》卷 2 〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 544, a26-29)

At this point the Buddha addressed Mañjuśrī, “You go inquire about Vimalakīrti’s illness.” Mañjuśrī addressed the Buddha, “World-honored One, that superior one (i.e. Vimalakīrti) is difficult to respond to. “He has profoundly attained the true characteristic, and he is good at explaining the essentials of the Dharma. His eloquence is unhampered, and his wisdom is unhindered (MR, p. 107).

Here the comprehension of the “true characteristic” constitutes the first of a series of attributes characterizing Vimalakīrti, the “hero” of the sūtra and a true Mahāyāna Buddhist model. Xuanzang’s rendition of this expression is much more neutral and “bland”; in fact it just says “he has deeply penetrated the Buddhist teachings”<sup>353</sup>. In the same way, Zhi Qian’s translation does not bear - or hint to - any particular philosophical implication: “he has deeply penetrated the essentials of the doctrine”<sup>354</sup>.

In chapt. 2 we find the following passage concerning the duality constituted by the idea of Self and its destruction:

<sup>350</sup> Whitehead evidences that the use of *shixiang* 實相 and *shiji* 實際 in Kumārajīva’s version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* shows an orientation towards a “positive reality language” (i.e. a characterisation of the Buddhist ultimate reality in positive, assertive terms) which is absent from Zhi Qian’s rendition and which - in his opinion - in some cases “anticipate the doctrine of the indwelling of the Buddha nature in every man expressed in the Nirvana sūtra” (Whitehead 1976, pp. 164 - 167)

<sup>351</sup> See for example the following passage: 「爾時世尊問維摩詰：「汝欲見如來，為以何等觀如來乎？」 維摩詰言：「如自觀身實相，觀佛亦然。」《維摩詰所說經》卷 3 〈見阿閼佛品 12〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 554, c28-p. 555, a1)

<sup>352</sup> In a study focused on Kumārajīva’s version of the *Diamond Sūtra* (Zacchetti 2015) Zacchetti has already pointed out the Kuchean master’s “creative use” of the term *xiang* 相 in translation and the productivity of the deriving lexical choices in the context of Chinese exegesis. As to the compound *shixiang* 實相, Zacchetti says that “whatever its origin, there is little doubt that the term *shí xiàng* 實相 is typical of Kumārajīva’s translations, where it is used to render various terms, and it often occurs even without a clear Sanskrit parallel. More precisely, it is one of the focal points of its conceptual and terminological system centred on *xiàng* 相 [...]” (*Ibidem*, p. 183). My research on Kumārajīva’s version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* confirms and corroborates the findings of his study.

<sup>353</sup> 「深入法門」《說無垢稱經》卷 3 〈問疾品 5〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 476, p. 567, b27)

<sup>354</sup> 「入深法要」《佛說維摩詰經》卷 1 〈諸法言品 5〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 474, p. 525, b19-20). Notice that the same expression is used by Dharmarakṣa (T170, p. 412, c10 and T337, p. 88, c8) and Zhu Fonian (T309, p. 994, c29-p. 995, a1).

「身、身滅為二。身即是身滅。所以者何？見身實相者，不起見身及見滅身，身與滅身無二無分別」《維摩詰所說經》卷 2〈入不二法門品 9〉（CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 551, b14-16）

The [idea of] Self and the destruction of the [idea of] Self constitute a duality. [The idea of] Self is identical to the destruction of the idea of Self. Why? Those who see the real characteristic of the Self do not generate the [two separate views of] the Self and the destruction of the Self. Self and the destruction of the Self are without duality and cannot be differentiated (lit., “without discrimination”).

Here again Kumārajīva’s translation states that the duality in question is overcome by seeing the Self under the aspect of its “real (or true) characteristic”, which is emptiness. Such idea is absent from the other two Chinese translations, and it is particularly interesting to observe how Xuanzang’s rendition of this passage marks a shift from Kumārajīva’s epistemological approach based on the concept of *xiang* 相<sup>355</sup> to a gnoseological (or psychological) one that emphasizes the process of knowing and the mental constructions generated by the subject rather than the object of knowledge:

「是薩迦耶及薩迦耶滅分別為二。若諸菩薩知薩迦耶即薩迦耶滅。如是了知，畢竟不起薩迦耶見，於薩迦耶薩迦耶滅，即無分別、無異分別<sup>356</sup>。」《說無垢稱經》卷 4〈不二法門品 9〉（CBETA, T14, no. 476, p. 578, a24-28）

The Self-identity view (Skr. *satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*) and the destruction of the Self-identity view form a duality. [Great beings] such as the bodhisattvas know that the Self-identity view and its destruction are the same. Knowing this, they do not generate any Self-identity view whatsoever, and with regard to [the duality formed by] the Self-identity view and its extinction they do not hold any discriminating thought, [not even] the discriminative idea of their being different.

The same difference in approach can be observed in the passage in chapt. 12 where Vimalakīrti explains the way in which he sees the Buddha: while Kumārajīva translates “as if contemplating the real characteristic of my own body—so do I view the Buddha”<sup>357</sup>, Xuanzang’s version has instead “I contemplate the Tathāgata as there were nothing I could see—so do I view [the Tathāgata]”.<sup>358</sup> Both versions are followed by a typically Mādhyamika critique of the three times: “when I view the Tathāgata, he does not come in the past, does not go in the future, and does not abide in the present”.

An even more convincing evidence that Kumārajīva is using the notion of “true characteristic” for wittingly orienting the reading of the sūtra is found in a couple of passages where the nature of the scripture itself is characterized. In chapter 13 Śakra Devānām Indra announces to the Buddha that he has never heard “this scripture of the definitive true characteristic of the

<sup>355</sup> Kumārajīva’s approach to Buddhist emptiness is here defined “epistemological” in that it is based on the demolition of the notion of *xiang* 相 (*lakṣaṇa*, “characteristic”) which served in the Abhidharma as a powerful conceptual tool for defining and classifying the dharmas (cf. Zacchetti 2015, pp.171 - 174). In other words, in the eyes of the Kuchean translator dharmas are impossible to know (and hence to be established as self-existing entities) right because the characteristic defining and identifying them cannot be found; being so, the “true characteristic” (*shixiang* 實相) is actually an “absence of characteristic” (*wuxiang* 無相), i.e. emptiness.

<sup>356</sup> On the expressions “無分別” and “無異分別” cf. 「經。所以者何(至)有異分別。

贊曰。此釋人華二別所以。無分別者。無總執分別。無異分別者。無差別（add variant 分別）。又初無共相。後無別相。」《說無垢稱經疏》卷 5〈觀有情品 7〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1782, p. 1083, c21-23）

<sup>357</sup> 「如自觀身實相，觀佛亦然。」《維摩詰所說經》卷 3〈見阿閼佛品 12〉（CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 554, c29-p. 555, a1）

<sup>358</sup> 「我觀如來都無所見，如是而觀。」《說無垢稱經》卷 6〈觀如來品 12〉（CBETA, T14, no. 476, p. 584, a20）

inconceivable, autonomous, numinous penetration”<sup>359</sup>, a sentence where the term *shixiang* defines the core insight of the whole scripture. Xuanzang’s version has instead “such a dharma teaching of the inconceivable emancipation of the autonomous numinous transformation”<sup>360</sup> and Zhi Qian “such pure conversion [generated by] the Buddha-truth”.<sup>361</sup>

In a similar fashion, another passage of the same chapter says that “[the profound sūtras explained by the buddhas] rely on the meanings of the true characteristic of the dharmas”<sup>362</sup>, while Xuanzang has “[they] rely upon the authentic meaning of the dharmas”<sup>363</sup> and Zhi Qian “[they] penetrate the true essentials of the dharma meaning”<sup>364</sup>.

As a final remark on this important matter, it would be useful to recall that Kumārajīva’s only treatise mentioned in the sources - and now lost - was titled *Treatise on the True Characteristic* 實相論 and that later Chinese exegetes described his philosophical position as *Shixiang zong* 實相宗 (Sect [whose doctrine focuses on] the True Characteristic)<sup>365</sup>; such pieces of evidence once more prove the centrality of this conception in the master’s beliefs.

### b. The “Three Voids” (viz. “Three [types of] emptiness”, *san kong* 三空)

In Kumārajīva’s *Commentary* a particular importance is given to the conception of the “Three Voids” (i.e. three fundamental terms describing the ultimate Buddhist truth), which - as it deserves to be noted - we find discussed at length in various passages of *Da zhidu lun*<sup>366</sup>. When the sūtra text reads “The ‘Dharma’ is identical to ‘Suchness’, ‘Dharma Nature’ and ‘True Reality’”<sup>367</sup>, these are carefully explained as follows:

什曰。此三同一實也。因觀時有深淺，故有三名。始見其實，謂之如；轉<sup>368</sup>深，謂之性；盡其邊，謂之實際。以新學為六情所牽，心隨物變。觀時見同，出則見異，故明諸法同此三法）《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 346, c26-p. 347, a2)

K: These three [terms] indicate the same thing. Since [the Dharma] can be looked at with different degrees of depth, these three different names are used. When one first sees [such] reality, he calls it “Suchness” (Skt. *tathatā*); when [his vision] grows deeper, he calls it “[Dharma-]nature” (Skt. *dharmatā*, *dharmā-dhātu*); when he fathoms its boundaries, he calls

<sup>359</sup> 「此不可思議，自在神通，決定實相經典。」《維摩詰所說經》卷 3〈法供養品 13〉（CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 556, a3-4)

<sup>360</sup> 「如是所說不可思議，自在神變，解脫法門。」《說無垢稱經》卷 6〈法供養品 13〉（CBETA, T14, no. 476, p. 585, c14-15)

<sup>361</sup> 「若此純法化者」《佛說維摩詰經》卷 2〈法供養品 13〉（CBETA, T14, no. 474, p. 535, b13)

<sup>362</sup> 「依於諸法實相之義。」《維摩詰所說經》卷 3〈法供養品 13〉（CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 556, b29)

<sup>363</sup> 「真實法義之所歸依，」《說無垢稱經》卷 6〈法供養品 13〉（CBETA, T14, no. 476, p. 586, c12)

<sup>364</sup> 「為入有義法之正要」《佛說維摩詰經》卷 2〈法供養品 13〉（CBETA, T14, no. 474, p. 536, a5-6)

<sup>365</sup> See on this Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 236

<sup>366</sup> According to *Da zhidu lun*, the three terms 如, 法性 and 實際 represent the absolute in its real aspect; like the nirvāṇa, they are unconditioned dharmas (*changfa* 常法) (cf. T1509 p. 171, b22-23 and p. 271, c27-29). On the substantial coincidence of these three terms cf. the following passage 「問曰：如、法性、實際，是三事為一？為異？若一，云何說三？若三，今應當分別說！答曰：是三皆是「諸法實相」異名。所以者何？凡夫無智，於一切法作邪觀，所謂常、樂、淨、實、我等。佛弟子如法本相觀，是時不見常，是名無常；不見樂，是名苦；不見淨，是名不淨；不見實，是名空；不見我，是名無我。若不見常而見無常者，是則妄見；見苦、空、無我、不淨亦如是，是名為如。如者，如本，無能敗壞。以是故，佛說三法為法印，所謂一切有為法無常印、一切法無我印、涅槃寂滅印。」《大智度論》卷 32〈序品 1〉（CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 297, c14-24). Cf. also the following lines up to p. 298, a10.

<sup>367</sup> 「法同如、法性、實際」《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 346, c26)

<sup>368</sup> 轉：（副）(1) 常用在形容詞前，有時也用在動詞前，表示程度的變化較前為甚，可譯作“更加”、“愈加”等 (Dong Zhiqiao and Cai Jinghao 1994)

it “Reality-limit” (Skt. *bhūta-koṭi*)<sup>369</sup>. Those who are still beginners [in the Buddhist practice] are hindered by the six feelings and their mind (=mental representation) changes according to the things [they examine]; what they look at may be the same, but then they conceptualize it in a different way. This is why [the sūtra] clarifies that all dharmas are identical to these three dharmas.

Slightly above in the text, in a related passage Sengzhao further clarifies this comment resorting to a simile which had been probably heard from the master himself:

（肇）曰。如、法性、真際。此三空。同一實耳。但用觀有深淺故別立三名。始見法實，如遠見樹，知定是樹，名為“如”。見法轉深，如近見樹知見（read with variant -）是何木，名為“法性”。窮盡法實，如盡知樹根莖枝葉之數，名為“實際”。此三未始非樹，因見為異耳。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷2〈弟子品3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 346, c7-13）

SZ: “Suchness”, “Dharma-nature”, “True limit”: these [terms are collectively known as] the “Three Voids”; they indicate the same thing. However, since they can be looked at with different degrees of depth, three different names are established. When one first sees the reality of the dharmas - like one who sees a tree from afar and recognizes it being a tree -, this is called “Suchness”. When one grows a deeper vision of the dharmas - like one who sees a tree and can state what kind of tree it is -, this is called “Dharma-nature”. When one fully comprehends the reality of the dharma - like one who knows in detail the root, the trunk, the branches and the number of leaves -, this is called “Reality-limit”. These three [terms] all indicate the same tree, but differ on the basis of [the different depth] of the vision. [...]<sup>370</sup>

The deepest characterization of the ultimate (which is the “True limit” - *zhenji* 真際 -, or “Reality-limit” - *shiji* 實際 -) is in turn explained by Kumārajīva in *Mādhyamika* terms as the middle way between existence and inexistence:

（什）曰。[...]有無非中。於實為邊也。言有而不有。言無而不無。[...]

《注維摩詰經》卷2〈弟子品3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 347, a3-4）

K: [...] being and non-being cannot be considered the middle way. In relation to the Actual, they are but extremes. If you call [the Reality-limit] “existent”, it is not existent, if you call it “inexistent”, it is not inexistent.

<sup>369</sup> On the conception of “Param Bhūtakoti” (ultimate reality-limit) in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* see Streng 1982.

<sup>370</sup> Cf. also the following two commentarial entries in which Sengzhao readdresses the topic of the “three Voids”:

**Accordance is bodhi, because of accordance with suchness; Abiding is bodhi, because of abiding [in the] Dharma-nature; Approach is bodhi, because of the approach to the reality-limit** (MR, p. 98). SZ: This is not different from the meaning of the “Bodhi of the three Voids”. To [act in] accordance with the fundamental characteristic is called “suchness”, so [in the text the term bodhi] is linked to “accordance”; to abide constantly without changing is called “nature [of the dharmas]”, so [in the text the term bodhi] is linked to “abiding”; to approach the other shore of the True Characteristic is called “limit”, so [in the text the term Bodhi is linked to “approach”] 「順是菩提，順於如故；住是菩提，住法性故；至是菩提，至實際故（肇）曰：不異三空菩提義也。隨順本相謂之“如”，故繫之以“順”；常住不變，謂之“性”也，故繫之以住；到實相彼岸謂之“際”，故繫之以“至”。」《注維摩詰經》卷4〈菩薩品4〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 363, a8-12); SZ: In the first six stages [of the bodhisattva path the practitioners] still have not a pure and concentrated mind; when dealing with the existent they abandon emptiness, when dealing with emptiness they abandon the existent. They are not able to be involved in both existence and emptiness keeping an equanimous perfect mind. So when adorning the lands for converting the beings [their mind is] adulterated with attachment. This is not what can be called “to practice virtue in a skillful way”, so [the text says] “it is not skill in means”; actually [only by] controlling themselves with the three voids can [the practitioners] have wisdom. 「（肇）曰。六住以下心未純一。在有則捨空。在空則捨有。未能以平等真心有無俱涉。所以嚴土化人則雜以愛見。此非巧便修德之謂故“無方便”。而以三空自調故有慧也。」《注維摩詰經》卷5〈文殊師利問疾品5〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 379, a4-8）



### c. Upāya (*fangbian* 方便) and its relation to transcendental wisdom (*zhihui* 智慧)

Kumārajīva attributes great importance to “skill in means” (*fangbian* 方便) - which is indeed one of the key conceptions presented in the sūtra - and explains it in his *Commentary* as follows:

「方便有二種。一深解空而不取相受證。二以實相理深，莫能信受，要須方便，誘引群生令其漸悟。」《注維摩詰經》卷 7〈佛道品 8〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 393, a18-21)

K: There are two kinds of skillful means: the first is to deeply understand emptiness and not to cling to its characteristics or “receive” [the mark of its] attainment; the second is to use skillful means for luring the beings and make them progressively awake, [this being] a necessary strategy motivated by the fact that the True Characteristic is [so] deep a principle [that] nobody can believe and accept it [at once] .

It is this second kind of upāya that occupies a central position in the sūtra and translates into an endless series of wonderful miraculous actions performed by the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas. These have all the same purpose, i.e. transmitting the highest truths of the Mahāyāna to the ordinary beings adapting to their faculties. In fact,

[...]若直明法空，則乖於常習，無以取信，故現物隨心變，明物無定性，物無定性則其性虛矣。菩薩得其無定，故令物隨心轉。則不思議乃空之明證 [...]《注維摩詰經》卷 1 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 327, c20-24)

[...] if the emptiness of the dharms were directly exposed, this would contravene the ordinary [mental] habits and there would be no way [for the beings] to believe in it. Hence, [the sūtra] shows that things can be transformed at will [by the Buddhas and bodhisattvas] and in this way it clarifies that they do not possess a fixed nature; being so, their nature is empty. The bodhisattva has understood this un-fixed nature of things, and so can make things change at will. Hence, “inconceivability” is an evident proof of the emptiness [of all things].

So great is the efficacy of skill in means that it even surpasses Wisdom. When the sūtra text states that “the perfection of wisdom is the bodhisattva’s mother; skillful means is his father (MR, p. 136)”<sup>371</sup> Kumārajīva comments that

什曰：[...]智度雖以明照為體，成濟萬行，比其功用，不及方便，故以為母。正方便父。梵音中有父義[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 7〈佛道品 8〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 393, a16-18)

K: [...] even though the perfection of wisdom is characterized by a glowing reflection, as to helping the beings in countless ways, it is less effective than skillful means. For this reason, while [wisdom] is considered as mother, skill in means is rightly considered as father” [...]

Under the perspective of skill in means, even conceptions considered erroneous according to the Buddhist doctrine like “being” and “emptiness” (understood as pure absence of reality) can be used as effective “pedagogical” tools for addressing different beings and correcting their faulty views:

什曰。[...]佛法有二種：一者有，二者空。若常在有則累於想著，若常觀空則捨於善本。若空有迭用則不設二過。猶日月代用，萬物以成。」《注維摩詰經》卷 6〈觀眾生品 7〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 383, b25-28)

<sup>371</sup> 「智度菩薩母，[...]方便以為父。」《注維摩詰經》卷 7〈佛道品 8〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 393, a12-15)

K: [...] The Buddhist Dharma (=teaching) is of two different kinds: one is [based on] being, the other on emptiness. If one constantly focuses on the being he will be hindered by attachment; if he constantly concentrates on emptiness he will discard the good roots [for enlightenment]. When [the teaching] alternates being and emptiness, those two faults are avoided. [Being and emptiness] are like the sun and the moon whose alternation makes the myriad things prosperate.

In another passage Kumārajīva even states that:

「什曰。有無迭用，佛法之常。」《注維摩詰經》卷 8〈入不二法門品 9〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 396, b24)

K: The alternate use of being and non-being is the constant [dynamics of] the Buddhist Dharma.

Before Kumārajīva's arrival in Chang'an, the Chinese Buddhists tended to understand and explain the emptiness expounded in the *Prajñāpāramitā* in rather negative terms, influenced as they were by the Xuanxue metaphysical speculations (in particular Wang Bi's theory of the "fundamental non-being", *benwu* 本無). Maybe this is the reason why the Kuchean master repeatedly stresses the fact that being and non-being (or "emptiness") are but interdependent conceptions without any substantial meaning; they can indeed be used as provisional expedients in the process of teaching but do not represent themselves the Ultimate (which actually consists in the radical rejection of both). When explaining the sūtra sentence "The dharmas ultimately do not exist: this is the meaning of emptiness"<sup>372</sup>, the master aptly clarifies:

「什曰。本言空，欲以遣有。非有去而存空。若有去存空，非空之謂也。二法俱盡乃空義也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 354, b7-9)

K: Fundamentally, when we speak about emptiness, we are just using it in order to get rid of [the false conception of] existence, and we don't have to keep maintaining emptiness once existence has been discarded. If we still maintain it, then this is not [what we call] "emptiness" [in Mahāyāna]. [In fact] the [true meaning of] emptiness is the obliteration of both dharmas [of existence and emptiness].

#### d. The Buddhist religious path toward enlightenment

In describing the progression in the understanding of the Buddhist dharma, Kumārajīva stresses the importance of the realization of impermanence. Consider the following comment on the sūtra sentence:

「現見菩薩曰：盡不盡為二法，[...]」（什曰。無常是空之初門。破法不盡，名為“不盡”。若乃至一念不住，則無有生；無有生，則生盡；生盡，則畢竟空。是名為“盡”也）《注維摩詰經》卷 8〈入不二法門品〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 397, c15-18)

**Manifest Perception Bodhisattva said: "Complete exhaustion and incomplete exhaustion constitute a duality [...]"**

K: Impermanence is the most basic stage in the realization of emptiness. What is called "incomplete exhaustion" [in the text] means "an incomplete confutation of the dharmas [as existing entities]". If one can progress to the stage where not a single thought abides, then there is no more origination. When origination ceases, then the ultimate emptiness [is achieved]. This is called [in the text] "complete exhaustion".

According to the Kuchean master, impermanence and emptiness represent respectively the first realization and the ultimate attainment in the Buddhist training process. In philosophical terms they basically express the same fundamental truth, but with different degrees of comprehension:

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<sup>372</sup> 「諸法究竟無所有，是空義。」《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 354, b7)

「迦旃延，諸法畢竟，不生不滅，是無常義。

什曰。凡說空則先說無常。無常則空之初門。初門則謂之“無常”。畢竟則謂之“空”。旨趣雖同而以精麁為淺深者也。何以言之？說無常則云“念念不住”。不住則以有繫住。雖去其久住而未明無住。是麁無常耳。未造其極也。今此一念若令繫住則後亦應住。若今住後住則始終無變。始終無變據事則不然。以住時不住所以之滅。住即不住乃真無常也。本以住為有。今無住則無有。無有則畢竟空。畢竟空即無常之妙旨也。故曰“畢竟空是無常義”。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 353, c24-p. 354, a6)

**“Kātyāyana, the dharmas are the ultimate (atyanta), [they are] neither generated nor extinguished: this is the meaning of impermanence.**

K: Usually when explaining emptiness, impermanence is first explained. [In fact,] impermanence represents the most basic stage in the realization of emptiness.

[In the text] this basic stage is called “impermanence”, whereas “the ultimate” is called “emptiness”. Even though they are equal in meaning, they differ in terms of “refinement”, [the first being more] superficial and [the second] more deep. What does this mean? We explain impermanence by saying that [the dharmas exist] only for a very short while and do not abide; [but if we say that] they do not abide, [we implicitly accept that] there is an existing entity to which the [property of] abiding is attached. Even though [impermanence serves to] discard the idea that the dharmas abide permanently, it does not clarify the [absolute] non-abiding (Skr. *aniketa*) [which derives from the intrinsic absence of self-nature]. This is a “rough [definition of] impermanence” which does not get to the ultimate meaning of it.

Now, if we concede that this instant has the property of abiding, then the following one should also abide, and if they both abide then things would never change [in time]. But the experience proves that it's not like that, [and things are subject to change]. It is because of the fact that while [dharmas are thought] to abide they actually do not abide that things can proceed towards [change and] destruction. [So even that provisional] abiding is actually non-abiding: this is the “True Impermanence”.

Originally [, according to the first definition of impermanence, what] abides is considered to be existent; now from the perspective of [the absolute] non-abiding [things are shown] to be inexistent. The inexistence [of all abiding things] is the ultimate emptiness, and this in turn represents the most subtle meaning of impermanence. This is why [the text says that] “[the dharmas are] ultimately [neither generated nor extinguished:] this is the meaning of impermanence” [...]

For what regards the progression on the path of bodhisattvahood, Kumārajīva - paraphrasing the sūtra text but at the same time enriching it with further information - describes it as follows:

「隨其心淨則一切功德淨。

什曰。“直心”，以誠心信佛法也。信心既立則能發行眾善。眾善既積，其心轉深。轉深則不隨眾惡。棄惡從善，是名“調伏”。心既調伏，則遇（read as 萬<sup>373</sup>）善斯行。遇（read as 萬）善斯行，則難行能行。難行能行，故能如所說行。如所說行則萬善兼具。萬善兼具故能迴向佛道。向而彌進是方便力也。方便大要有三：一善於自行而不取相；二不取證；三善化眾生。具此三已，則能成就眾生。成就眾生則三因具足。三因具足則得淨土。土既清淨則眾生純淨。眾生純淨則不說雜教。故言說清淨。受法則具下三淨。具下三淨則與化主同德。故曰一切淨也。上章雖廣說淨國行。而未明行之階漸。此章明至極深廣，不可頓超，宜尋之有途，履之有序。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 337, a13-27)

**According to the purity of his (=the bodhisattva's) mind are all his merits pure (MR, p. 78).**

<sup>373</sup> For a parallel cf. 「什曰。上說始種善根。今明修習增進。修習增進，名為“行”。萬善斯行，無所齊限。亦云不以劫數為限也。肇曰。上云種善根。此云無齊限，轉增廣也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈菩薩行品 11〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 407, c7-10)

K: “Sincerity” means to have a sincere faith in the Buddhist Dharma. When this faith is established [the practitioner] can start practicing good deeds. When many good deeds have been accumulated, his mind grows deeper and so he does not pursue the evil [any more]. To refuse [all] evil and to pursue [all] good, this is called “to discipline [one’s intention]”. When the intention is disciplined, innumerable good deeds are performed, [and in such a way] difficult practices can be undertaken. In such way, one can practice in conformity with the teaching and be provided with all goods. Hence he will be able to apply [the merits deriving from his good deeds] to the Buddha Way. Progressing further he acquires the power of skill in means, which is roughly of three kinds, namely 1. To be good at practicing by oneself without clinging to [illusory] phenomena; 2. Not to acquire [the ultimate] realization [and leave the world]; 3. To be good at converting the beings. Having acquired those three powers, one can accomplish [the emancipation of] sentient beings and in such way be endowed with all three prerequisites (i.e. perfect sincerity 至誠心, profound resolve for it 深心, and resolve on demitting one’s merits to others 迴向發願心) for obtaining the Pure Land. When the land is pure, also the beings [inhabiting it] are pure, and as a consequence heterodox teachings are not issued [any more] and the preaching is pure. When [the beings] receive such [pure] dharma [the bodhisattva] acquires the “three purities” mentioned below and has the same virtues as the Lord of Conversion (i.e. the Buddha). This is why [the texts] says that “everything is pure”.

The above paragraph had extensively explained the practice through which the lands are purified, but it had not yet clarified its stages of progression. This paragraph clarifies that the supreme [principle of the doctrine] is deep and broad, and one cannot surpass at once [all his limitations and grasp it]; instead, he ought [to keep in mind that] in pursuing it there is a path, and in walking [this] path there is a progression.

#### e. The bodies of the Buddha

Another important philosophical topic touched upon by Kumārajīva in T1775 is the doctrine of the different bodies of the Buddha. As a preamble to the discussion of this subject (which is elaborated upon in different ways also by Sengzhao and Daosheng), it is important to point out here that such theory was the result of a long process of elaboration<sup>374</sup>: as a matter of fact, even the conception of a *dharmakāya* intended as the most veritable body of the Buddha opposed to the physical body is not clearly expressed in the early phase of the Mahāyāna development.<sup>375</sup>

If we examine the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論, which is likely to have been Kumārajīva’s main source of information on the topic, we find that even though the theory of different bodies of the Buddha is not made the object of a specific discussion and is not clearly formulated, it is

<sup>374</sup> The systematization of the different views on the bodies of the Buddha into the classic Mahāyāna threefold embodiment (*trikāya*) seems to be originally Yogācāra and to have been first presented in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (an early Yogācāra work) (see Radich 2007 (a), pp. 163 - 164). The three bodies are: “(1) the *dharmakāya*, or “the body of Dharma”, or the *svābhāvikakāya* “embodiment with respect to essential nature”, usually interpreted as a quasi-metaphysical, transcendent or abstract form in which buddha(-hood) exists as the true nature of all existence (or existents), this being the form in which buddhahood is embodied for the jñāna of (the) buddha(-hood) himself/itself; (2) the *sāmbhogikakāya*, or “embodiment(s) pertaining to common enjoyment”, i.e. the miraculous body endowed with the major and minor marks of the mahāpuruṣa (“great man”), which is golden, gigantic etc., and which is the body seen by congregations of advanced, “celestial” bodhisattvas when the Buddha preaches advanced discourses to them; (3) the *nairmāṇikakāya*, or “embodiment(s) pertaining to illusory manifestation”, i.e. a kind of docetic body deployed by the Buddha to teach ordinary worldlings; in other words, the ordinary mortal body in which he apparently was born in historical India in perhaps the sixth or fifth century BCE as the scion of a princely family, fled to the wilderness to undertake ascetic practices, was enlightened under the bodhi tree, preached for several decades, and died.” (definitions from Radich 2007 (a), p. 163).

<sup>375</sup> Harrison has pointed out that even though in Lokakṣema’s corpus the term *fāshēn* 法身 does appear, this most likely translates the terms *dharmadhātu* or *dharma-tā*, not *dharmakāya* (Harrison 1992). Radich has argued that “in some cases, it seems clear, *pace* Harrison, that whatever Sanskrit term underlies these Chinese terms, the concept at stake is apparently moving in the direction of the later *dharmakāya*” (Radich 2007 (b), pp. 973 - 974; this view has been recently questioned by Zhao Wen, cf. Zhao Wen 2018, p. 121 *et seq.*); moreover - a fact that bears mention for the present discussion - Radich identified the earliest occurrence of *fāshēn* with the meaning of *dharmakāya* in chapt. 2 of Zhi Qian’s version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (see his discussion of this important passage in *Ibidem*, pp. 973 - 986). On the *trikāya* doctrine see also Williams 2009, pp. 172 - 186, Lamotte 1958, pp. 689 - 693 and Nagao 1973.



nevertheless already quite developed. In fact, this text repeatedly refers to the existence of two bodies of the Buddha, viz. a physical one named “Buddha with a living body” 生身佛 or “[Buddha with a] body born from father and mother” 父母生身, and a dharmic one representing the embodiment of the absolute Buddhist truth, variously called “Dharma-body” 法身佛, “body generated by the dharma-nature” 法性生身 (also 法性生佛, 法性生身佛) or “True body” 真身 (also 真佛, 根本真佛); such distinction appears to be based upon the fundamental Mādhyamika theory of the “two levels of truth” (*er di* 二諦), viz. the conventional and the absolute one.<sup>376</sup> While in the text of *Da zhidu lun* there is no ambiguity on the “physical body”, the characterization of the Dharma-body presents some inconsistencies and contradictions which - at a close look - ultimately derive from the difficulty of explaining the ways in which this absolute body of the Buddha interacts with the beings in the world<sup>377</sup>. In fact, sometimes it is said that through his Dharma-body the Buddha can instruct and convert the beings; in other cases we read instead that only the advanced bodhisattvas can perceive such body and the teaching issued by it due to their absolute and un-mediated form<sup>378</sup>; in yet other cases it is said that the beings can perceive the *dharmakāya* but only if the Buddha allows them to do so.<sup>379</sup> It must have been in order to clarify these ambiguities that a “transformation body” of the Buddha (化佛, 化身, 神通變化身) - distinct from the Dharma-body but fundamentally not different from it<sup>380</sup> - was elaborated. In *Da zhidu lun* this type of body is frequently mentioned: according to the text, it is emanated by the Buddha for the purpose of adapting to specific circumstances and performing a restless salvific action;<sup>381</sup> also the advanced bodhisattvas can use a similar body for appearing in

<sup>376</sup> Cf. 「佛有二種身：一者、法身，二者、色身。法身是真佛，色身為世諦故有。」《大智度論》卷 99 〈曇無竭品 89〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 747, a18-19); 「有二種道：一者、令眾生修福道，二者、慧道。福道故，說三十二相；慧道故，說無相。」《大智度論》卷 29 〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 274, a10-11); 「佛告比丘尼：「非汝初禮，須菩提最初禮我。所以者何？須菩提觀諸法空，是為見佛法身，得真供養，供養中最，非以致敬生身為供養也。」」《大智度論》卷 11 〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 137, a16-19).

<sup>377</sup> Cf. for ex. 「佛有二種身：一者法性身，二者父母生身。是法性身滿十方虛空，無量無邊，色像端正，相好莊嚴，無量光明，無量音聲，聽法眾亦滿虛空（此“眾”亦是法性身，非生死人所得見也）；常出種種身、種種名號、種種生處、種種方便度眾生，常度一切，無須臾息時。如是法性身佛，能度十方世界眾生。受諸罪報者是生身佛，生身佛次第說法如人法。以有二種佛故，受諸罪無咎。」《大智度論》卷 9 〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 121, c26-p. 122, a5).

The annotation added in brackets in the above quote - very likely added by a Chinese scribe - well demonstrates the attempt of making sense of the numerous contradictions related to this topic.

<sup>378</sup> In the following passage we find these two contradictory formulations simultaneously present: 「而佛身有二種：一者、真身，二者、化身。眾生見佛真身，無願不滿。佛真身者，遍於虛空，光明遍照十方，說法音聲亦遍十方；無量恒河沙等世界滿中大眾皆共聽法，說法不息，一時之頃，各隨所聞而得解悟。如劫盡已，眾行業因緣故，大雨澍下，間無斷絕，三大所不能制；惟有劫盡，十方風起，更互相對，能持此水。如是法性身佛有所說法，除十住菩薩，三乘之人皆不能持；惟有十住菩薩不可思議方便智力，悉能聽受。眾生其有見法身佛，無有三毒及眾煩惱，寒熱諸苦一切皆滅，無願不滿。如如意珠，尚令眾生隨願皆得，豈況於佛！珠與一切世間之願，佛與一切出世間願。若言「佛不能悉滿眾生所願」，是語不然！」《大智度論》卷 30 〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 278, a18-b5)

<sup>379</sup> Cf. 「是中是法性身，佛身無量無邊，光明、說法音聲遍滿十方國土，國中眾生皆是近佛道者，無量阿僧祇由旬眾[9]中說法；勝無量億阿僧祇日月光明，常從身出，佛令眾生見則得見，若不聽則不見。是佛一一毛孔邊常出無量無邊阿僧祇佛，一一諸佛等無異，於化佛邊展轉復出。隨應度眾生見佛優劣，根本真佛無有分別大小之異。如是等若見、若聞名、若聞如是功德，深信敬重故，所種善根，云何不畢定作佛？」《大智度論》卷 93 〈淨佛國土品 82〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 712, b11-21)

[9]中=生【聖】。

<sup>380</sup> Cf. 「當知佛與化佛無有差別，諸法法相無異故。」《大智度論》卷 84 〈三惠品 70〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 646, a15-16)

<sup>381</sup> Cf. 「上已說有二種佛：一者、法性生身佛，二者、隨眾生優劣現化佛。為法性生身佛故，說「乃至聞名得度」；為隨眾生現身佛故，說「雖共佛住，隨業因緣有墮地獄者」。」《大智度論》卷 34 〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 313, a29-b3)

different times and places and converting the beings, but this is still inferior to the Buddha's one in terms of power and intensity.<sup>382</sup>

The Buddha's bodies constitute one of the main topics discussed in a series of epistles exchanged between Kumārajīva and the religious leader of the Southern Buddhist community of Mt. Lu Huiyuan 慧遠 (334 - 416).<sup>383</sup> The explanations given by Kumārajīva in this important document basically derive from a systematization of the same tenets exposed in *Da zhidu lun*, viz. 1. the *dharmakāya* is the epitome of the true nature of all things (i.e. emptiness)<sup>384</sup>; 2. the True Dharma-body of the Buddha and its teachings are perceivable only to the bodhisattvas who have already reached the last stage of progression; in order to manifest himself to the other beings in the world the Buddha uses a "transformation body". While "the *dharmakāya* appears as a sun, the [various] transformation bodies it generates are like the sunlight"<sup>385</sup>; 3. the *dharmakāya* of the Buddha and that of the *bodhisattvas*, even though very similar, are actually not identical; in fact, since even the most advanced bodhisattvas still have "minor bonds" 微結, the power of their *dharmakāya* - however extraordinary - is limited compared to the Buddha's one.<sup>386</sup>

In Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* the *dharmakāya* is not given a specific and articulated explanation. Nevertheless, some important references to it can be found. For example, when the sūtra text states that "the bodies of the Tathāgatas are bodies of dharma"<sup>387</sup>, Kumārajīva explains that

法身有三種：一，法化生身，金剛身是也；二，五分法身；三，諸法實相和合為佛。故實相亦名法身也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 359, c19-22)

K: The *dharmakāya* is of three kinds: 1.the dharma transformation-body, which is the diamond-like body (Skt. *vajrakāya*); 2.the body [made of] five [attributes] (viz. morality 戒, meditative absorption 定, wisdom 慧, emancipation 解脫, perfect knowledge of the state of emancipation 解脫知見); 3.the sum of the True Characteristic of all dharmas constitutes the Buddha; and this is why the True Characteristic is also called *dharmakāya*<sup>388</sup>.

Even though active in the triple world, the dharma body has features that cannot be described through the conventional categories:

<sup>382</sup> Cf. 「菩薩有大神力，住十住地，具足佛法而住世間，廣度眾生故，不取涅槃；亦如幻師自變化身，為人說法。非真佛身：雖爾度脫眾生，有量有限；佛所度者，無量無限。菩薩雖作佛身，不能遍滿十方世界；佛身者普能遍滿無量世界。所可度者，皆現佛身。亦如十四日月，雖有光明，猶不如十五日。」《大智度論》卷 29〈序品 1〉(CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 273, b9-16)

<sup>383</sup> These epistles have been collected and preserved in *Dasheng dayi zhang* 大乘大義章 [T1856]. For a synthesis of the topics discussed in these documents see Zürcher 2007, pp. 227 - 229; for a detailed discussion of the dates, transmission and original structure of the materials preserved in this work see Wagner 1971.

<sup>384</sup> Cf. 「大乘部者。謂一切法無生無滅。語言道斷。心行處滅。無漏無為。無量無邊。如涅槃相。是名“法身”。」《鳩摩羅什法師大義》卷 1 (CBETA, T45, no. 1856, p. 123, c9-11)

<sup>385</sup> Cf. 「真法身者。遍滿十方虛空法界。光明悉照無量國土。說法音聲。常周十方無數之國。具足十住菩薩之眾。乃得聞法。從是佛身方便現化。常有無量無邊化佛。遍於十方。隨眾生類若干差品。而為現形。光明色像。精麁不同。如來真身。九住菩薩尚不能見。何況惟越致及餘眾生。所以者何。佛法身者。出於三界。不依身口心行。無量無漏諸淨功德本行所成。而能久住。似若泥洹。真法身者。猶如日現。所化之身同若日光。」《鳩摩羅什法師大義》卷 1 (CBETA, T45, no. 1856, p. 122, c29-p. 123, a10)

<sup>386</sup> Cf. 「佛法身，菩薩法身。名同而實異。菩薩法身雖以微結如先說，佛法身即不然。但以本願業行因緣，自然施作佛事。」《鳩摩羅什法師大義》卷 1 (CBETA, T45, no. 1856, p. 125, c5-7)

<sup>387</sup> 「諸如來身即是法身」《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 359, c19)

<sup>388</sup> Cf. the sūtra text: “You should understand, Ānanda, the bodies of the Tathāgatas are bodies of the Dharma, not bodies of longing. The Buddha is the World-honored One, who has transcended the triple world. The Buddha's body is without flaws, the flaws having been extinguished. The Buddha's body is unconditioned and does not fit the [conventional] analytic categories. A body such as this—how could it be ill, how could it be vexed?” (MR, p. 95)

「什曰：非肉身，即法化身也。非三界之形，故“過於三界”。雖有生滅而無老病眾惱十事之患，故名“無漏”。無漏則體絕眾為，故名“無為”。形超五道，非物之數，故曰“無數”也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 359, c23-27）

K: What is not a physical body is a dharma transformation-bodhi. It shows no [material] shape in the triple world, and so [it is said to] “transcend the triple world”. Even though it arises and vanishes, it does not experience old-age, illness, afflictions or the vexation of the ten [deluding] factors, so it is called “without flaws”. Being without flaws, [this] body surpasses all what is conditioned, so it is called “unconditioned”. Its shape is beyond the five destinies [and] it does not fit the [ordinary] categories of beings, so it is said “uncategorizable”.

Moreover, Kumārajīva points out that “most of the bodhisattvas have a dharma body. However, the [visible] form through which they respond to the *stimuli* [of the world] has the same appearance as the humans”<sup>389</sup>; in other words, those bodhisattvas can change the appearance of their body at will. And they can also conceal the body completely without leaving any trace of it in the world; in such a way, their “dharma transformation-body transcends the [five] skandhas, the [eighteen] realms and the [twelve] means of sensation”<sup>390</sup> and is not subject to any hindrance. This is actually described as the “highest form of meditation”, by far superior to the śrāvakas’:

「夫宴坐者不於三界現身意是為宴坐。

什曰。[...]菩薩安心真境，識不外馳。是“心不現”也。法化之身，超於三界。是“身、心俱隱”，禪定之極也。聲聞雖能藏心實法，未能不見其身。身見三界，則受累於物。故隱而猶現，未為善攝也。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 344, b16-22）

**Sitting in repose is to not manifest body and mind in the triple world—this is sitting in repose** (MR. p. 85).

K: [When] the bodhisattva rests his mind in the True Sphere and his senses do not dash away, this is [called] “not to manifest the mind”. [When the bodhisattva is endowed with a] dharma transformation-body transcending the triple world, this is called “not to manifest body and mind”, and is the highest [form of] meditation. The śrāvakas are able to dwell with their mind in the True Dharma but cannot avoid manifesting their body. And when the body is manifested in the triple world, it becomes involved [in the distresses caused] by worldly things. Hence, being able to conceal [their mind] but still manifesting [their body, the śrāvakas] cannot be considered skilled in meditative concentration.

### 1.2.2.8 Questions from the audience

To conclude my analysis of Kumārajīva’s exegesis of the text a last important element needs to be pointed out. In chapter 1 I have already mentioned the fact that during the translation activity members of the audience could intervene raising questions on the meaning of the text. In Kumārajīva’s commentary traces are found of this interactive discussion mode; in fact, some 10 questions followed by the related answers were noted down by the scribes and eventually included - probably in a random and fortuitous way - in the comment itself<sup>391</sup>. The content of the

<sup>389</sup> [...]菩薩多是法身。然應感之形與物同迹。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 328, b25-26）

<sup>390</sup> 「法化之身，超出陰、界、入也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈菩薩行品 11〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 408, a4-5）

<sup>391</sup> Tu Yanqiu has interpreted these question-and-answer interventions as pure rhetorical devices employed by Kumārajīva himself in his oral exposition (cf. Tu Yanqiu 2005, pp. 140 - 143), an explanation which in my opinion is incorrect. Lo Yuet Keung has instead grasped the true nature of these materials, even though he has not further investigated the topic (cf. Lo 2002, p. 111: “Occasionally, Kumārajīva’s commentary is punctuated with a question (*wenyue* 問曰) immediately followed by an answer (*dayue* 答曰). This does not seem to be intended for rhetorical purposes; rather, it records the actual questions raised by a live audience”).

questions makes it quite clear that the questioners are of a Chinese cultural background and we can suppose that their interests reflect to a certain extent those of the Chinese audience as a whole. Even though the material is too scanty for allowing any comprehensive discussion of this practice, I provide here an analysis of the most interesting features of the material I have collected:

a. Four of the ten questions regard the logical and narrative coherence of the story and might well reflect the typical Chinese concern for concrete details and practical matters.

For example, when in the text (chapt. 3) Ānanda is asked by the Buddha to go inquire about Vimalakīrti's illness, a question is raised by someone in the audience about the apparent contradiction that Ānanda, famous for his prodigious memory and comprehensive knowledge of all Buddhist teachings, does not know that in fact Vimalakīrti is just pretending:

「故我不任詣彼問疾。佛告阿難。」

什曰。秦言歡喜也。問曰：“阿難持佛法藏。即其所聞，足知無病。今云何不達？”

答曰：“真實及方便，悉是佛語，故二說皆信。又云，阿難亦共為方便也。《注維摩詰經》卷3〈3 弟子品〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 359, a4-9）

**“Therefore, I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his (=Vimalakīrti's) illness.” The Buddha told Ānanda (MR, p. 95)**

K : [Ānanda] in Chinese means “to rejoice”.

**Question:** “Ānanda holds [in his mind] all the teachings of the Buddha. Based on what he had heard [from the Holy One] he should be able to know that [actually] there is no [such] illness. Why then is he now unable to realize that?”

**Answer:** “[Ultimate] Reality and expedients (viz. all the fictional elements in the plot of the story told in the sūtra) are both *Buddhavacana* (Buddha's modes of discourse)<sup>392</sup>, so they both deserve to be trusted. We could also say that [here] Ānanda is also [used as] an expedient”

One of the most well-known scenes of the sūtra is that of a goddess scattering heavenly flowers over the bodhisattvas and great disciples. When the flowers reach the bodhisattvas they all immediately fall off, but when they reach the great disciples they adhere to their bodies and do not fall, in such a way that even using all their numinous powers they are unable to remove them. The flowers do not stick to the bodhisattvas because “they have eradicated all discriminative thoughts”; instead, they stick to the disciples “because the latent influences [of their afflictions] are not yet exhausted”. Somebody from the audience points out the fact that also in the bodhisattvas the latent influences are not yet exhausted, so why is it that the flowers do not stick to them?

「結習未盡，華著身耳。結習盡者，華不著也。」

什云。問曰：“菩薩結習亦未盡，云何不著耶？”答曰：“有二種習：一，結習；二，佛法中愛習。得無生忍時，結習都盡。而未斷佛法愛習。”亦云：“法身菩薩雖有結習，以器淨故習氣不起也。《注維摩詰經》卷6〈7 觀眾生品〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 387, b29-c7）

**[The goddess said to Śāriputra:] “It is only because the latent influences [of your afflictions] are not yet exhausted that the flowers stick to your bodies. For those in whom the latent influences are exhausted, the flowers do not stick.” (MR, p. 127)**

**Question:** The latent influences are not yet exhausted in the bodhisattvas as well, so why do [the flowers] not stick on them?

**Answer:** There are two kinds of influence. The first is the “latent influence [of afflictions]”, the second is “the [negative] influence deriving from the attachment to the Buddha's doctrine”.

When one attains the forbearance of the non-arising [of the dharmas] the first kind of influence

<sup>392</sup> The Buddha has “three modes of discourse” 三佛語: unqualified, i.e. out of the fullness of his nature; qualified to suit the intelligence of his hearers; and both (cf. “三佛語” entry in Soothill 2010).

(i.e. the one mentioned in the sūtra text) is exhausted, even though the attachment to the Buddha's doctrine is not yet eradicated. We could also add that, even if the bodhisattvas endowed with a dharma-body<sup>393</sup> [still] had the "latent influence [of afflictions]", the substance [of their bodies] would be so pure that these would no more arise [in them].

In Chapter 10, nine million bodhisattvas from the country called Host of Fragrances want to proceed to the saḥā world in order to make offerings to Śākyamuni Buddha. Before leaving, the local Buddha named Accumulation of Fragrances advises them to withdraw the fragrance which exudes from their bodies, an intense perfume which could make the bodies and minds of those smelling it extremely joyful. This is in order not to cause the sentient beings they will come across generate thoughts of deluded attachment. In fact, as Kumārajīva explains, "a great anger causes confusion, but also a great joy [brings about] delusion [...]".

We know from the sūtra that the perfume in question was generated by the fragrant food that the buddha Host of Fragrances had previously offered to the congregation gathered in Vimalakīrti's room. At this point a question is raised by someone in the audience who has noticed a contradiction: if the fragrance can cause delusion, then why didn't the members of the congregation withdraw it from the food they were going to eat? Let us consider the whole passage in translation, including the sūtra text, Kumārajīva's explanation and the subsequent question and answer exchange:

「佛言：“可往。攝汝身香，無令彼諸眾生起惑著心。”

什曰。大怒則狂，大喜亦迷。宜攝汝香，防其惑因。問曰。若然者，云何不攝香飯。答曰。佛神力故。能杜其惑原。發其道意。故不攝也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 8 〈10 香積佛品〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 400, c10-14)

**Then the Buddha said: “You may go. However, withdraw the fragrances of your bodies, so as not to cause the sentient beings there to generate thoughts of deluded attachment”** (MR, p. 151)

**K:** A great anger causes confusion, but also a great joy [brings about] delusion. It is convenient to withdraw the fragrances from your body [in order] to avoid those causes of confusion.

**Question:** If it is so, why didn't they withdraw the fragrances from the food [they had]?

**Answer:** It is because of the supernatural power of the Buddha, which is able to obstruct the source of confusion and generate in them the intention of [reaching] enlightenment. This is why they did not withdraw [the fragrances from the food].

In chapter 11 we find Ānanda asking the Buddha: “World-honored One, the fragrance I smell **now** is one **I have never experienced before**. What fragrance is it?”. Here again, somebody from the audience finds an incoherence; in fact, in the previous chapter it was said that a fragrance pervaded the whole chiliocosm<sup>394</sup>. Being so, how come Ānanda didn't smelled it **at that time**?

「爾時阿難白佛言：“世尊今所聞香，自昔未有。是為何香？”

什曰。問曰：“上品“香氣普薰三千”，阿難云何不聞耶？答曰。非分，故近而不聞，今有以得聞也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9 〈菩薩行品 11〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 403, b15-18)

**Then Ānanda addressed the Buddha: “World-honored One, the fragrance I smell now is one I have never experienced before. What fragrance is it?”** (MR, p. 158)

<sup>393</sup> 法身菩薩 (a bodhisattva endowed with a dharma-body): a bodhisattva who has freed himself from illusion and attained the six spiritual powers 六神通 (cf. *Da zhidu lun* 「菩薩有二種：一者、生身菩薩，二者、法身菩薩。一者、斷結使，二者、不斷結使。法身菩薩斷結使，得六神通；生身菩薩不斷結使，或離欲得五神通。」《大智度論》卷 38 〈往生品 4〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 342, a22-25)

<sup>394</sup> Cf. 「飯香普薰毘耶離城，及三千大千世界。時毘耶離婆羅門、居士等，聞是香氣，身意快然，歎未曾有！」《維摩詰所說經》卷 3 〈香積佛品 10〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 552, c3-5)

**Question:** In the previous chapter [it is said that] the fragrance pervaded the whole chiliocosm, how is it that Ānanda did not smell it?

**Answer:** [Ānanda] was not destined to do so, hence he couldn't smell [the fragrance] even though he was surrounded by it. Now there are conditions enabling him to smell it.

**b.** A couple of questions show a special concern for matters related to morality and karmic retribution.

In chapter 3 of the sūtra, the Buddha addresses Ānanda and says: “Ānanda, even a small degree of blessings (i.e., merit) allows the wheel-turning sage king (*cakravartin*) to be without illness—how could the immeasurable blessings of the Tathāgata fail to exceed his in every regard?!” Kumārajīva explains the text by telling a parable in which the protagonist because of a small meritorious deed obtains to enjoy unmeasurable happiness in the subsequent ninety kalpas:

「有羅漢名薄拘羅。往昔為賣藥師。語夏安居僧言：『若有須藥，就我取之』。眾竟無所須。唯一比丘小病受一訶梨勒果。因是九十劫生天人中，受無量快樂。但聞病名而身無微患。於此生年已九十，亦未曾有病。況佛積善無量，疾何由生？」《注維摩詰經》卷3〈弟子品3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 359, b20-25)

**K:** There was an arhat named Vakkula who in the past was a medicine vendor. He said to the monks who were in summer retreat: “If somebody needs a medicine he can come and get it from me”. But in the end nobody needed it. Only a monk who had a small malaise got from him a harītakī fruit (= yellow-myrobalan). Because of that [meritorious deed], in the subsequent ninety kalpas he was reborn among the beings residing in the six heavens of desire and in the form-world enjoying immeasurable happiness and not [experiencing] the slightest disease. In his current life he has [already] lived up to ninety without ever falling ill.

This is even more so for the Buddha: [through his numberless good deeds] he accumulated an immeasurable merit, how could illness possibly generate [in him]?

Such an unbalanced relation between action and reward described in the story must have been striking from the Chinese moral perspective, in fact someone poses the question:

「問曰：善惡相對，報應宜同。五逆重罪一劫受苦。云何一果之善，受福無量耶？」《注維摩詰經》卷3〈弟子品3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 359, b25-27)

**Question:** “Good and evil are correlative [categories] and the karmic reward they bring about should be equal. The five gross sins cause man to suffer for a[n entire] kalpa. Then how is it possible that the good [karma deriving from] the [simple] offer of a fruit brings [such an] immeasurable happiness?”

Kumārajīva explains that:

「答曰：罪事重而力微。善事輕而勢強。譬有惡蛇，將取人食。先吐毒沫在地。人踐其上即時昏，熱不能起去。然後以氣吸之。三寶中作功德，亦復如是。初作功德時，其事雖微，冥益已深。然[然>後]方便引入佛道。究竟涅槃，其福乃盡。」《注維摩詰經》卷3〈弟子品3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 359, b27-c3)

**Answer:** “However grave, evil actions have a small power; however modest, good deeds have a great influence. Take as an example a poisonous snake who is about to capture a man for eating him. He first spits some poison on the ground [so that] the man when stepping on it feels dizzy, is caught by fever and is no more able to stand up and escape. Then he swallows him. Such is also the practice of meritorious deeds in the Three Treasures (i.e. in Buddhism): when you first practice the good deeds, no matter how modest they are, the invisible merit [deriving from them] is already deep; then by means of the “skillful devices” you are guided into the Buddhist path and when [at the end] you achieve the ultimate cessation your happiness will be complete”.



In chapter 4 the sūtra text says that “joy is to transcend the five desires” (MR, p. 102)<sup>395</sup>, and Kumārajīva explains that “this means to believe in moral restraints. When one attains the ‘four kinds of faith’ he first believes the Doctrine, then the Buddha and at last the Saṅgha and the moral restrictions.”<sup>396</sup>

At this point, someone in the audience must have found it strange that the faith in moral restraint came last in the sequence presented by the master, hence he asks:

「問曰。四信云何先信法，次信佛，後信僧及戒耶？」《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 366, b29-c1)

**Question:** With regard to the ‘four faiths’, why is it that one first believes the Doctrine, then the Buddha and at last the Saṅgha and moral restrictions?”

Kumārajīva, as he often does, explains the matter by means of an allegorical story:

「答曰。譬如人重病服藥。若病愈則信藥妙，(add variant 信) 藥妙，必由師。則信師也。雖師妙、藥良，要由善看病人，則信看病人也。三事雖妙，要由我能消息<sup>397</sup>則信我 (read with variant 戒) 也。法中四信亦復如是。觀實相、見諦時，煩惱即除，則信法妙也。三寶雖妙，要行之由我。我戒業清淨，故累病得除，則信戒也。深信四法，心常悅豫。可以諸神通性。故非天樂所擬哉！」《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 366, c1-9)


**Answer:** Take as an example a seriously ill man who takes a medicine. If [after having taken it] his illness is cured he will believe the efficacy of the medicine; but the efficacy [of the medicine in turn] depends on the pharmacist [who prepared it], so he will also be trusted. Even though the pharmacist has been skilled, and the medicine effective, [these ultimately] depend on the experienced doctor [who visited the patient and prescribed it], so the latter will [in turn] be trusted. Even though those three (i.e., the medicine, the pharmacist and the doctor) have been effective, to take good care of oneself [during the illness] depends [in the first place] on one’s good behavior, so [that man] will in turn trust those rules [of proper conduct].

The same happens with the “four kinds of faith”: when one discerns the real characteristic [of dharmas] (i.e., emptiness) and sees the truth [of Buddhist teachings], his afflictions (kleśa) are eradicated and he believes in the efficacy of the Doctrine. Even though the “Three Treasures” (i.e. the Doctrine, the Buddha and the Saṅgha) are effective, to practice [them] depends on oneself. If a man’s conduct [based on the observance of the restrictions] is pure, then the illness deriving from kleśa will be eradicated. [If so] he will believe those restrictions.

If one deeply trusts those four elements (i.e. the Doctrine, the Buddha, the Saṅgha and the Restrictions) his heart will be constantly filled with joy, he will be able to harmonize his spirit and penetrate the nature [of the dharmas]. Not even the joy of the gods is comparable to this!

c. The remaining four questions<sup>398</sup> regard a variety of different matters. Among them one is particularly interesting in that it focuses on the logical patterns used in the Mādhyamika for analyzing and eventually rejecting the false views. Chapter 9 is entitled “Entering the dharma gate of non-duality” and represents perhaps the “philosophical peak” of the whole scripture. In the opening lines Vimalakīrti poses to the congregation of bodhisattvas the question of how the bodhisattva enters the Dharma gate of non-duality; then the bodhisattvas expose in turn different “dualities” (e.g. generation and extinction; the self and the self’s attributes etc.) which need to be transcended in order to enter the gate of non-duality. Somebody in the audience makes the following objection:

<sup>395</sup> 「樂離五欲」《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 366, b28)

<sup>396</sup> 「曰。是信戒也。得四信時，先信法，次信佛，後信僧及戒也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 366, b28-29)

<sup>397</sup> 消息：(3) 又指調養、休息，一般針對疾病而言 (Cai Jinghao 1990, pp. 363 - 364). Cf. also Zhu Qingzhi 1992, p. 193 (11).

<sup>398</sup> I.e. [T1775] p. 392, a8-11; p. 396, c1-11; p. 403, c11-14; p. 418, c28-p. 419, b18.

「問曰。亦有三、四，乃至無量法門。云何獨說不二耶？」《注維摩詰經》卷 8〈入不二法門品 9〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 396, c1-2)

**Question:** [besides the two-fold pattern (method) of analysis and refutation], there are also three-fold ones, four-fold ones and so on, their range being [potentially] infinite. Then why discussing only “non-duality”?

Kumārajīva’s answer is very detailed and comprehensive:

「答曰。二，事少而惑淺。餘門，事廣而累深。二尚應破，則餘可知也。復次，萬法之生，必從緣起。緣起生法，多少不同。極其少者，要從二緣。若有一緣生，未之聞也。然則有之緣起，極於二法。二法既廢，則入於玄境。亦云二法門攝一切法門。」《注維摩詰經》卷 8〈入不二法門品 9〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 396, c2-7)

**Answer:** If we deal with a two-fold [pattern of analysis and refutation] the elements [involved] are few and there is less confusion. If we deal with other [more complex patterns] then the elements [involved] are numerous and the hindrances [to understanding] are more serious. The two-fold [pattern] has to be confuted in the first place, then the [critique to the] others can be [easily] inferred. Furthermore, the arising of the ten thousand dharmas necessarily depends on [causes and] conditions. The number of these conditions can vary, but there must be at least two of them, because there is no such thing arisen from [just] one condition. So the most basic [pattern exemplifying] the conditioned arising of dharmas is the two-fold one. Once those two [basic] items are rejected, one can access the mysterious sphere [of the ultimate truth]. We might also say that the two-fold pattern encompasses all the others.

The questioner is not yet satisfied; he also wants to know “why the oneness is not confuted”<sup>399</sup>, and Kumārajīva’s explanation is again illuminating and extremely to the point:

「答曰。若名數之，則非一也。若以一為一，亦未離於二。遣二，則一斯盡矣。復次，無相之一，名假而實立。實立則體與相絕。故直置而自無<sup>400</sup>也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 8〈入不二法門品 9〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 396, c7-11)

**Answer:** If you define oneness using a name, then [since name and oneness constitute a duality] it is not oneness [any more]; if you conceive oneness as “oneness”, [then the image you conceive and the reality it refers to constitute a duality, so] again you are not escaping the two-fold [pattern]. Once the two [fundamental elements] are refuted, [the idea of] “oneness” also ceases [to exist]. Furthermore, as to the [authentic] oneness which is without characteristics (無相之一), its reality is established by relying on a [provisional] definition; and once such reality is established [in this way], both its substance and characterizations come to an end. So, you simply display [those terms], and their inherent emptiness [will become self-evident].

### 1.2.3 Influences on the work organization of the translation ground

Kumārajīva’s *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* can be seen as the product of a specific work organization governing the activity of the translation ground. Being so, an analysis of the origins of the latter would no doubt contribute to shed some more light on the former. Would it be possible to investigate the many social and historical factors that contributed to build up the complex organization of the translation-ground under the Later Qin? Probably yes, to some extent; however, this would constitute a research topic in its own right and could not be

<sup>399</sup> 問曰。云何不破一耶？

<sup>400</sup> Cf. a similar formulation used by Kumārajīva in chapt. 5 「又問空何用空。什曰。若法性自空，則應直置而自空。諸賢聖復何用空慧空諸法耶？」《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 373, a3-4)



thoroughly dealt with in this thesis. This notwithstanding, some initial clues on this matter can be provided.

The materials witnessing the practice of the question-and-answer debates analyzed above, together with the overall *modus operandi* and work organization of the Buddhist translation ground during Kumārajīva's age described in the first chapter evidence the obvious, albeit fundamental, fact that the writing down of Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* is but the very last step of an overwhelmingly oral process which involved many different actors interacting with each other; as Wang Wenyan has pointed out, a common feature of the major Buddhist translation enterprises in China during the 5<sup>th</sup> century regardless of their geographical location (Guanzhong 關中, Hexi 河西, Jiangzuo 江左) is the simultaneous performance of the three activities of translation (*yi* 譯), exegesis/preaching (*jiang* 講) and discussion/debate (*lunbian* 論辯)<sup>401</sup>. All these three were orally performed in the translation hall which, besides a small number of specialized personnel involved in the actual translation work, hosted a vast audience of monks (many of whom were expert in exegesis, the so-called *yixue shamen* 義學沙門) and laymen who could intervene at any time posing to the translator questions on doubtful points and thus triggering a discussion.

This particular work organization represents an original creation of the Chinese Buddhist saṃgha of the time; it responded to precise religious needs and was influenced by specific socio-historical conditions. Such specificity can be better understood through comparison with the different *modus operandi* adopted two centuries later, under the Tang. In fact, we find that in this age translation and preaching are divorced from each other<sup>402</sup>. Sessions are no more attended by large crowds but only by a restricted number of carefully selected personnel well versed in the sūtras and śāstras of both the Great and Small Vehicles or “monks of wide learning” (*shuoxue shamen* 碩學沙門) possessing specific skills which are invited from all-over the empire. The translation enterprise, even though still sponsored and controlled by the state, is no more a “permanent activity”: when the decision is taken to translate a certain scripture, the selected specialists gather and work together for a certain time, then when the task is accomplished they go back to their own temples. Evidently, these changes were intended to maximize the accuracy and efficiency of the team, to reduce the “disturbances” caused by the intervention of non-specialized people from the audience and to shorten the time needed for the undertaking.

This work organization has a clear influence on the commentaries produced during the translation making them different from those belonging to the Kumārajīva's era: in the first place, working in a small team it was much easier for the translation assistants to note down the explanations delivered by the translator; there was little need to reorganize and re-arrange those annotations in a second moment, to the point that they were usually completed and made available at the same time of the translation itself. Secondly, the content of these commentaries is much more confined to the text itself and deals at length with translation-related issues; the text is rarely taken as a departure point for more general explanations and detours into Indian Buddhist history, philosophy etc.

The above comparison evidences the specificities of the Later Qin translation procedures, in particular the centrality of oral modes of translation and discussion, the openness of the debate on the text, the primary role played by the practice of debate in clarifying the meaning of the text,

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<sup>401</sup> Wang Wenyan 1984, pp. 131 - 141; cf. also Ōchō Enichi 1982, p. 226

<sup>402</sup> This was by no means a sudden change, but the result of a slow process of evolution. Wang Wenyan points out that as early as 397 CE (hence slightly before Kumārajīva's arrival in Chang'an) when Saṃghadeva translated the *Madhyamāgama* 中阿含 in Nanjing, the sessions were attended only by some 40 monks. This could be considered the embryonic form of the small scale specialized translation work teams which would become dominant during the Tang (Wang Wenyan 1984, p. 148).

the collectivity of the hermeneutical effort which resulted into the production of translations and related commentaries.

If we inquire into the Chinese institutions and practices that may have inspired (or at least influenced) such specific approach to translation, we cannot but mention the *dujiang* 都講 system and the pure conversations (*qingtán* 清談), two oral modes of debate which represented new forms of cultural transmission and dissemination grounded in the true revolution in classical scholarship that had occurred in the last period of the Later Han (in particular during the Jian'an period 建安 (196 - 220))<sup>403</sup>.

### The *dujiang* 都講 system

According to the early sources<sup>404</sup>, the *dujiang* system was an oral mode of Buddhist preaching in which a dharma master (*fashi* 法師) was in charge of explaining a certain scripture, while a discussant (*dujiang* 都講) recited the original text piece by piece and intervened posing questions on its meaning. In this way the text was clarified through a question-and-answer debate to the benefit of the general public attending the lecture.

Even though the *dujiang* acted as main questioner, the debate was actually opened to the public and any listener could directly address the *fashi* and ask him for elucidations<sup>405</sup>. Indeed, at times the questions raised could be hard to answer, to the point that the *fashi*, not being able to reply, had to ask another monk to take over<sup>406</sup>.

Apparently the *dujiang* system was first codified by Dao'an during his Xiangyang 襄陽 years, when the Buddhist community counted already hundreds of monks and was growing rapidly and the need arose to establish norms and standard practices for the activities of the saṃgha, included the lectures on the sūtras<sup>407</sup>. According to Sun Kaidi's reconstruction, this activity followed a rather standard proceeding: at the beginning incense was offered and Sanskrit verses (*fanbei* 梵唄 or *zanbei* 讚唄) were recited by the assembly; secondly, the title of the scripture was declaimed and its main purport explained (this was called "to elucidate the topic" (*kaiti* 開題) or "issue the topic" (*fati* 發題)); thirdly, the scripture was chanted piece by piece by the *dujiang* and then in turn explained by the *fashi*; once the explanation had been completed (*jiejiang* 解講),

<sup>403</sup> Cf. Tang Yiming 2002, pp. 118 - 134

<sup>404</sup> See for ex. *Shishuo xinyu*, *Wenxue* 40 (cf. Yu Jiaxi 1993, pp. 198-199) which constitutes the *locus classicus* of the *dujiang* system. In the fourth year of the Yonghe 永和 era (348 CE) the monk Zhi Daolin was preaching on the *Vimalakīrtinīrdeśa*: "Zhi Daolin and Xu Yuan were both at the residence of the King of Kuaiji [Sima Yu 司馬昱]. [They discussed the Buddhist scriptures:] Zhi [Daolin] acted as dharma master, Xu [Yuan] as *dujiang* ("discussant"). Whenever Zhi [Daolin] explained a principle the whole audience was convinced by his words and whenever Xu [Yuan] raised an objection, everybody applauded enthusiastically. However, in both cases [the listeners] only acclaimed the splendid performance of the two, without [really] comprehending the meaning of their arguments". 支道林、許掾諸人共在會稽王齋頭。支為法師，許為都講。支通一義，四座莫不厭心。許送一難，眾人莫不拊掌。但共嗟詠二家之美，不辨其理之所在。

<sup>405</sup> We know for example that once the monk Yu Fakai 于法開, who rivaled in fame with Zhi Daolin, instructed his disciple Fawei 法威 to intervene during Daolin's preaching on the *Lesser Prajñāpāramitā* and pose him some difficult questions which would put him in an embarrassing position (see on this *Shishuo xinyu*, *Wenxue* 45; cf. Yu Jiaxi 1993, pp. 200 - 201)

<sup>406</sup> This is the case of the dharma master Meng 猛: while preaching on the *Satyasiddhi-sāstra* 成實論 the *literatus* and calligrapher Zhang Rong 張融 (444 - 497) posed him so many difficult questions that he ended up claiming to be indisposed and asking his disciple Daohui 道慧 to take over and answer in his place (see *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], p. 375, b25-27)

<sup>407</sup> The *Gaoseng zhuan* mentions three sets of rules established by him, one of which seems to refer to the practice of preaching, i.e. "rules regarding the offering of incense, the assignment of seats, the recitation and explanation [of the scriptures]" 行香，定座，上經，上講之法《高僧傳》卷 5 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 353, b24-25). See on this Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, pp. 162 - 163

incense was again offered and Sanskrit verses recited before the assembly disperse (*sanxi* 散席, or *jiezuo* 解座)<sup>408</sup>.

The origins of this system constitute a much-debated issue: even though some believe it developed from the Confucian exegetical tradition of the Later Han (the term *dujiang* 都講 is found in the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 and it is absent from the *Han shu* 漢書)<sup>409</sup>, Tang Yongtong argues that it derived from the Indian Buddhist tradition and proves that references (or at least allusions) to it are found in very early Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures<sup>410</sup>. Be as it may, it is important here to remark the fact that it played a major role in the great development of Chinese Buddhist exegesis during the Eastern Jin (317 - 420)<sup>411</sup>. As Zhou Shujia 周淑迦 has pointed out, in this period this religious practice attracted the interest of the cultured elites, and monks like Zhi Daolin and Yu Fakai were invited by Emperor Ai 哀帝 (341 - 365) to lecture on the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. Those monks are also known to us as creators of peculiar exegetical theories (*yi* 義, in later sources rather improperly called *zong* 宗, “sect”) based on Xuanxue philosophy aiming at providing a philosophical explanation of Buddhist emptiness and its relation to the phenomenal world<sup>412</sup>. We can easily imagine how the activity of preaching and the associated question and answer debates favored and even enhanced the elaboration of those articulated exegetical theories<sup>413</sup>.

Even though most of the references to the *dujiang* system found in the sources are referred to the Southern dynasties, there is evidence that this mode of discussion was known and practiced (albeit with much less frequency) also in the north, and in particular at the Later Qin court<sup>414</sup>. When Kumārajīva arrived in Chang’an the preaching and translation activities came to form two sides of the same process and there is every reason to believe that the *dujiang* system had an influence on the organization of the translation ground (particularly the admission of large crowds entitled to raise questions that could also trigger articulated debates) and consequently also on the materials that constituted its written output.

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<sup>408</sup> See Sun Kaidi 2009, p. 2

<sup>409</sup> As Mou Runsun 牟潤孫 has proved, in the *Hou Han shu* the term *dujiang* (or *dujiangsheng* 都講生) indicates particularly advanced disciples who had reached a thorough understanding of the Confucian scriptures and were able to clarify the doubtful points. For this reason they often helped their master in the teaching activity. However, starting from the Northern and Southern dynasties the Confucians adopted the Buddhist *dujiang* system with its rituals and conventions for their debates and hence the term came to acquire a meaning almost identical to its Buddhist counterpart (see Mou Runsun 1984, p. 34)

<sup>410</sup> For example, Kang Senghui in his *Preface to the Anban shouyi jing* 安般守意經序 explains how, in order to expound that scripture, the Buddha “transformed himself into two [distinct] bodies” (*huawei liangshen* 化為兩身) one of which posed questions and the other provided the answers, in such a way that the meaning of the sūtra was clearly exposed to the audience 「於是世尊化為兩身。一曰何等，一尊主演。于斯義出矣。」《出三藏記集》卷 6 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 43, b14-16). Moreover, in a comment inserted in the *Da mingdu jing* 大明度經 it is said that “in this pure dharma Subhūti is the *dujiang*; in [that] unparalleled dharma Śāriputra is the *dujiang*” (善業於此清淨法中為都講，秋露子於無比法中為都講)。」《大明度經》卷 1 〈行品 1〉 (CBETA, T8, no. 225, p. 482, a1)

<sup>411</sup> See Zhou Shujia 2006, p. 117

<sup>412</sup> For example, Zhi Daolin had elaborated the theory “identity with matter” (*jise* 即色) and Yu fakai was among the supporters of the theory of “stored impressions” (*shihan* 識含)

<sup>413</sup> After Kumārajīva’s arrival in Chang’an and the translation of the Mādhyamika scholastic literature those interpretations were criticized as unorthodox and quickly forgotten. Sengzhao analyzed and confuted three of these theories in his famous treatise *Emptiness of the Non-Absolute* (*Buzhen kong lun* 不真空論)

<sup>414</sup> The *Gaoseng zhuan* relates that master Hongjue 弘覺 once preached on the *Lotus sūtra* for the king Yao Chang 姚萇 and in that occasion Sengliē 僧弼 himself acted as *dujiang* (see Yundi’s 曇諦 biography, T50, no. 2059, p. 370, c24-p. 371, a16). Moreover, we are told that Sengruī once asked the young and talented Sengdao 僧導 what wishes he had regarding the Buddhist dharma; the latter answered that he wished to act as *dujiang* during his preaching (see Sengdao 僧導 biography, T50, no. 2059, p. 371, a17-c7).

## The “pure conversations” (*qingtán* 清談)

Another practice that surely had an influence on the modes of Buddhist debate and hence on the formal organization of the translation activity is that of the “pure conversations” (*qingtán* 清談). I do not intend to deal here with each and every aspect of this multi-faceted social phenomenon which was enormously influential in the Medieval times<sup>415</sup>; instead, I will confine myself to outlining its origins and describing its proceedings before pointing out its relation to Buddhist exegesis.

The term *qingtán* indicates a specific mode of rhetorical discussion engaged between members of the aristocratic families (*menfa shizu* 門閥士族) particularly popular during the Wei-Jin 魏晉 period; the topics discussed were very varied and included the Three Mysteries (*sanxuan* 三玄, i.e. *Laozi* 老子, *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and *Zhouyi* 周易), the relation between names (*ming* 名) and principles (*li* 理), and between individual skills (*cai* 才) and natural endowment (*xing* 性), the characterization of human types (*mu* 目) and the definition of the Sage (*shengren* 聖人) etc. This kind of debate, which soon became an exclusive pass-time of the gentry circles was characterized by a special emphasis on rhetorical skills, refinedness of language and wit. The main source for the study of *qingtán* is the *Shishuo xinyu* by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403 - 444) with its invaluable commentary by Liu Xiaobiao 劉孝彪 (Southern Liang 南梁 502 - 557).

The proceedings of *qingtán* are clearly outlined in the surviving materials. When two speakers (*tanke* 談客 or *nengyanzhe* 能言者) engaged in a discussion, they gathered in what was called “a debate session” (*tanzuo* 談座) which was attended by a small audience of noblemen. The two parties were respectively called “host” (*zhu* 主) and “guest” (*ke* 客). The host started the conversation (*fa tanduan* 發談端, *fa ti* 發題) by exposing an argument (*xuli* 敘理, or *shuyi* 樹義); then the guest raised questions or objections to it (*zuonan* 作難) to which the host had to answer (*bianda* 辯答). One question-and-answer constituted “a round” (*yi fan* 一番) and it was usually after a certain number of such rounds that one of the two parties remained speechless and had to admit defeat (*qu* 屈). Hence, the argument held by the winner was called “victorious argument” (*shengli* 勝理) and sometimes was challenged by another speaker who entered the game and started a new conversation with the winner.

The *qingtán* activity started to develop at the end of the Eastern Han, under the emperors Huan 桓帝 (147 - 167) and Ling 靈帝 (168 - 189), when a group of leading lecturers of the Imperial Academy (the most important among them being Guo Linzong 郭林宗 and Jia Weijie 賈偉節) and students in the number of thirty thousand launched a critical movement against the current government policies and the disreputable conduct of members of the imperial household as well as the eunuchs and the emperor. They rejected the form of scholarship practiced in the Academy known as “sentence-and-paragraph” style commentary on the Classics (*zhangju* 章句) which they considered pedantic and ostentatious (*fuhua* 浮華), and resorted to **modes of oral discussion** (*youtan* 游談) for debating political ideas and evaluating the skills and capabilities of the new fellow-scholars joining the movement. In this new sparkling atmosphere, discussions on scholarly issues still maintained their importance, even though now “broadness” (*bo* 博) and “comprehensiveness [of understanding]” (*tong* 通) were favored over the hair-splitting pedantic approach formerly adopted in the disquisitions on single sentences of the Classics. Such oral

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<sup>415</sup> The *qingtán* practice is discussed in Zürcher 2007, in particular pp. 93 - 95. One of the most detailed studies on the Pure Conversations is found in Tang Yiming 2002; see also the important article by Yu Yingshi (Yu Yingshi 1987)

discussions also served to establish relations of friendship and mutual trust and esteem between members of the Academy.

The new trend originated in the Academy soon spread all over the empire influencing even the local bureaucrats. During the Zhengshi 正始 era of the Wei 魏 (240 - 249) the *qingtán* practice was highly standardized and became the main mode of political and philosophical discussion of a group of brilliant and innovative scholars gathered around He Yan 何晏 (ca. 190 - 249) and Xia Houxuan 夏侯玄 (209 - 254) in the capital city of the kingdom, Luoyang 洛陽. Those talented *literati* constituted the first generation of Xuanxue philosophers. Following the invasion of Northern China by Xiongnu tribes and the fall of Luoyang 洛陽 (311), many noble families (along with a huge mass of commoners) migrated south of the Yangzi River where a series of Chinese dynasties were founded. The practice of Pure Conversations hence spread in Southern China and greatly developed becoming during the Eastern Jin one of the most important channels through which Buddhism spread in the gentry circles. In fact, the Buddhist monks came to participate in the *qingtán* sessions<sup>416</sup> and the Buddhist sūtras became an important topic of discussion along with the Xuanxue philosophical theories very in vogue at the time. The two topics somehow merged with each other, a marriage favoured by the common belief of *literati* and monks that in the end the Buddhist sūtras dealt with the same fundamental “mystery” which had been formerly described in the *Laozi*.

It is important here to point out the aspects of the *qingtán* activity which are related to the Buddhist exegesis:

**1. The *qingtán* activity contributed to enhance and develop the Buddhist oral exegesis.** As it has been pointed out above, one of the topics of *qingtán* was that of the Three Mysteries. Difficult points of these three texts (but also many other ones) were discussed in an attempt to put forward new interpretations, often through sophisticated dialectic argumentations. A good example of this is the new interpretation of the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi* elaborated by the monk Zhi Daolin: “when he was at the Temple of the White Horse, he engaged in debate with Chamberlain Feng, and their discussion focused on the chapter *Wandering at Leisure* [of the *Zhuangzi*]. Zhi [Daolin] outstandingly put forth a new understanding of it, different from the one provided by the two philosophers [Xiang Xiu and Guo Xiang]; he established an original interpretation, unlike that of the worthies [of the past]. [Indeed, previously] those worthies in studying the text had not been able to fathom it. Thereafter Zhi [Daolin]’s interpretation was adopted [by the majority of the *literati*]”<sup>417</sup>.

This passage suggests that the *qingtán* discussions promoted a new kind of free and “uninhibited” exegesis no more constrained by traditional views, and this no doubt had an influence on the modes in which the Buddhist sūtras (particularly the *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*) and their theories were interpreted<sup>418</sup>. It is no coincidence, for instance, that the above mentioned Zhi Daolin also elaborated the exegetical theory known as “identity with matter” (*jise* 即色) aiming at explaining the relation between matter and emptiness, and the monk Zhi Mindu, another participant of the *qingtán* meetings, elaborated the theory of the “emptiness of the mind”

<sup>416</sup> An important economic aspect fostered the Buddhist monks’ participation in the *qingtán* sessions. As Tang Yiming has pointed out, the monks who had escaped from the disorders in the North and moved south of the Yangzi River (*guo jiang* 過江, or *du jiang* 渡江) seeking refuge in the Jiangnan area often could neither rely on monasteries for their sustenance nor count on the assistance of some acquaintance among the noble families. Hence they had to search for a rich patron who could provide for them, and the *qingtán* meetings provided the ideal means for gaining fame and being introduced into the highest gentry circles (see on this Tang Yiming 2002, pp. 285 - 288).

<sup>417</sup> [...] 支道林在白馬寺中，將馮太常共語，因及《逍遙》。支卓然標新理于二家之表，立異義于眾賢之外。皆是諸名賢尋味之所不得，後遂用支理。(Shishuo xinyu, Wenxue 32; cf. Yu Jiaxi 1993, pp. 192 - 193)

<sup>418</sup> See on this Ōchō Einichi 1958, pp. 264 - 272

(*xinwu* 心無). During the first half of the 4th century this bloom of interpretation was also favored by the fact that the Indian commentaries on those scriptures were not yet available, and no Indian exegete was found who could explain those texts.

**2. Often a written record of the oral exegesis developed during the *qingtán* sessions was produced.** We know from the sources that often after the *qingtán* meetings some speakers wrote down their argumentations on a certain topic and then developed them further in the form of philosophical treatises<sup>419</sup>. Hence, oral debate contributed to stimulate the dialectic reasoning and brought up new ideas that were later elaborated and put down in the form of written composition; we find here a complex and creative interaction between orality and writing, something very similar to what happened at the translation ground during the Later Qin period. In fact, as it emerges from this research, the commentaries composed by monks like Sengzhao, Sengrui and Daosheng were not merely a transcription of what they had heard (if it were so, they would have been very similar to one other) but instead a complex admixture of different materials including *quasi-verbatim* transcriptions of the translator's explanations, new ideas stimulated by the preaching of the foreign master, and original speculations in which they tried to formulate their own personal understanding by conciliating the foreign teachings with their own cultural background and with some constitutive elements of the Chinese tradition in general.

**3. The *qingtán* modes of debate were adopted in the Buddhist milieu, particularly for deciding matters of orthodoxy.** A very good example in this respect is the story reported in *Gaoseng zhuan* in which the monk Daoheng, supporter of the *xinwu* 心無 (“emptiness of the mind”) exegetical theory, is defeated by Tanyi in a debate held at the presence of a large assembly of monks. The proceedings are almost identical to those seen in the *qingtán* sessions, as well as the technical terms employed for describing them. Moreover, the exchange is characterized by a great display of rhetorical skills and victory is achieved through a final witty remark which leaves the opponent speechless and provokes the laughter of the audience:

「時沙門道恒頗有才力。常執心無義，大行荆土。汰曰：“此是邪說應須破之”。乃大集名僧，令弟子曇一難之。據經引理，析駁紛紜<sup>420</sup>。恒仗 (read with variant 拔), 其口辯不肯受屈。日色既暮，明旦更集。慧遠就席，設 (read with variant 攻) 難數番，關責鋒起。恒自覺義途差異。神色微動，塵尾扣案，未即有答。遠曰：“不疾而速。杼軸何為？”座者皆笑矣。心無之義於此而息。」《高僧傳》卷 5 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 354, c13-20)) At the time, the talented monk Daoheng was an advocate of the *xinwu* [exegetical] theory, and greatly spread it in the Jingzhou area. Fatai said: “This is a heresy and must be confuted.” Thereupon he summoned the eminent monks and ordered his disciple Tanyi to question him. [Different] reasons were quoted using the scriptures as reference, analysis and expositions of the different positions followed copious and intricate. Heng was superior, and his eloquence was not yield. [Since] it was almost dusk [they paused for the night] and met again early next morning. Huiyuan was seated in the audience and went to the attack making objections for a few rounds. The exchange became heated. Heng began to realize that he was drifting from the path. He lost composure and kept hitting the table with his flywhisk while speaking out of turn. Huiyuan then commented: “How you make haste without hurrying<sup>421</sup>, but alas where is that getting you!” Those attending laughed. And it was in that occasion that the *Xinwu* doctrine died out.

The *qingtán*-like oral disputes were extremely popular in the Southern Dynasties, but there is evidence that at the Later Qing court these were also practiced. We know for example from Sengzhao's biography that the monk was a skilled debater and people came to Chang'an from

<sup>419</sup> Cf. Tang Yiming 2004, pp. 125 - 126

<sup>420</sup> 紛紜: 多而雜亂 (Zang Wanqi 1993, p. 212)

<sup>421</sup> This is an expression from the *Book of Changes*, Appendix 3

miles away for the purpose of challenging him<sup>422</sup>; also Daorong once debated with a brahmana from the Western lands and the king Yaoxing in person attended the event.<sup>423</sup> Perhaps these contests were organized in roughly the same way as the above example.

In conclusion, we can notice how the *dujiang* system and the *qingtian* practice (which, incidentally, show many similarities in their proceedings and in the topics discussed<sup>424</sup>) had an influence on the Buddhist discussion modes and even enhanced the exegetical activity. The great Buddhist translation enterprises started at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century began to borrow elements from both and it was during Kumārajīva's age that these were integrated into the translation/lectures in an innovative and efficient way.

#### 1.2.4 The format of Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*

Another important issue to address with regard to Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* is that of assessing the commentarial genre it belongs to. In the course of Chinese Buddhist history many different exegetical formats (e.g. *koujie* 口解, *zhu* 注, *shu* 疏, *xuanyi* 玄義 etc.) have been developed and the exact features of some of them still constitute a debated topic.

It is commonly recognized that in the early period of Buddhist exegesis the *Zhu*-type commentary (i.e. “interlinear commentary”<sup>425</sup>) was the most widely used; however, between the late 4<sup>th</sup> and the early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries we find in the sources mentions to another commentarial format, which is called *Shu* 疏 (or *yishu* 義疏), and will later become dominant in the Buddhist exegetical *milieu*. What are the characteristics of this style and in which aspects does it differ from the interlinear one? This is a difficult question that we cannot avoid if we want to assess from a stylistic point of view not only Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* but also Sengrui, Sengzhao and Daosheng's ones.

Some valuable research works have already investigated to a certain extent the issues related to the above question. Based also on Ochō's work<sup>426</sup>, Kanno has provided a good overview of the different types of Buddhist Commentarial formats developed from the early period to Sui dynasty; the author adopts the definition of the Confucian interlinear commentaries elaborated by Kogachi Ryūichi<sup>427</sup> and applies it to the Buddhist *milieu*: the *zhu* commentary is “a form that reproduces passages from the original scripture in their entirety. Explanations are then applied to the text, so that the original sūtra text is accorded priority and the interlinear commentary itself does not stand independent of the subject scripture”. On the other hand, “the ‘exposition of meaning’ (i.e. the *Shu*-type) style of commentary does not reproduce the entire text of the sūtra. It includes only selected passages (duly abridged and edited by the author), to which comments are then added, making it something that must be regarded as the work of the compiler

<sup>422</sup> See Sengzhao's biography: “Some [...] came to Chang'an from a thousand *li* away carrying [a provision of] cereals on their shoulders in order to engage in debate [with him]. Not only was Zhao's thinking profound and mysterious, he was also a skilled debater: taking advantage of the opportunities [inadvertently given by the opponents] he overcame them and his eloquence could never be arrested. At that time the refined Confucians and talented scholars all admired his sharp dialectic and those who wanted to compete with him were all defeated.” 或千里趁負 (read with variant 負糧) 入關抗辯。肇既才思幽玄，又善談說。承機挫銳，曾不流滯。時京兆宿儒及關外英彥，莫不挹其鋒辯，負氣摧[血\*(梁-木-(泳-永))]。』《高僧傳》卷6 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 365)

<sup>423</sup> Cf. Daorong's biography in *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059], p. 363, c3-24)

<sup>424</sup> We may notice how monks like Zhi Dun were at the same time involved in both practices.

<sup>425</sup> *Zhu* 注 means “to insert”. The *Zhu*-commentary indicated explanatory annotations which were inserted in small characters after the unit (a character, a word or a sentence) they explained.

<sup>426</sup> Ochō 1979

<sup>427</sup> Kogachi Ryūichi 2001 (b)



himself”.<sup>428</sup> According to Kanno, the shift between the *zhu* and *shu* types of commentary which took place at the beginning of the Northern and Southern Dynasties was due on the one hand to the increasing length of the translated Buddhist texts which made it very troublesome for the commentator to copy down the entire text in order to insert his notes, and on the other hand to the different philosophical approach to the scripture that started developing after the first phase of acquisition; in fact, “whereas the inter-linear commentaries tended to pay attention to relatively superficial matters, such as the meanings of the words themselves, the expository commentaries tended to focus on the underlying themes of the text”.<sup>429</sup>

With regard to the T1775 Kanno states that “such reproduction of the complete text of the sūtra is representative of the interlinear commentary format. However, there is some question as to whether the constituent commentaries of *Zhu Weimo* were interlinear commentaries or commentaries of the expository type prior to their combination into a single work”.

A different explanation of the difference between the *zhu* and *shu* types of commentary is elaborated by the Chinese scholar Mou Runsun 牟潤孫 (1909 - 1988) in his important study on the subject<sup>430</sup>. According to him, whereas the *Zhu* commentaries were written explanations on the text, the *Shu* consisted in transcriptions of orally delivered exegesis. This is confirmed - he says - by the etymology of the term *shu* 疏 (traditionally explained as “explanation” or even “sub-commentary”) whose original meaning was actually “to record” (*ji* 記), to write down what had been heard. The beginning of this type of commentaries is put in relation by the author to the introduction of Buddhism with its emphasis on oral recitation and explanation of texts. The modern Buddhist scholar John Jorgensen accepts this definition and claims that the Buddhist *Shu* commentaries

were derived from, or were inspired by, the translation process, during which the content of the sūtra (either as a whole – which was probably rare – as chapters or paragraphs, and as lines) was debated at length by learned monks (not only by translators), and questions and answers were exchanged, in order to ensure that the translation was accurate and doctrinally sound. These debates, or at least the conclusions, were recorded as part of the draft from which the polished, final form was made.<sup>431</sup>

It is clear how Kanno and Mou have chosen different basic criteria for defining the *Zhu* and *Shu* commentaries: Kanno’s definition is based mainly, albeit not exclusively, on the configuration and outlook of the received text (the inclusion of the sūtra text in its entirety or the transcription only of the parts of it which have been commented upon); instead, Mou focuses on the origin and nature (written or oral) of the materials which are eventually rearranged into a text.

Both views have their reasons and deserve to be taken into account. However, we are dealing here with materials (what we call “translations”, “annotations”, “commentaries” etc.) whose actual provenance and nature are often far from clear and in many ways escape unilateral categorizations. For example, the final outlook of a received text may depend - and it often does - on its editors rather than its authors; moreover, it is not always easy to determine whether a text had an oral provenance or was born as a written composition, also considering the fact that - particularly during the Medieval period - the borders between orality and textuality are very “permeable”<sup>432</sup>; for doing so we should know the history of the text itself and the exact

<sup>428</sup> Kanno Hiroshi 2003, p. 302. In his article Kanno admittedly relies on the work of Enichi Ōchō 横超慧日 who has written an important in-depth study on the development of Chinese Buddhist exegesis (Cf. Ōchō 1979).

<sup>429</sup> Kanno Hiroshi 2003, p. 303

<sup>430</sup> Mou Runsun 1987

<sup>431</sup> John Jorgensen, pers. comm., in Makeham 2003, p. 88

<sup>432</sup> This problem has been well evidenced by Funayama Tōru, who demonstrated how many texts transmitted as translations actually include or even represent *in toto* oral lectures or oral exegetical explanations delivered by Indian or Chinese monks (cf. Toru 2006).

circumstances and modes which determined its composition, and such information is rarely available.

Here I do not intend to venture in a comprehensive discussion of the many problems described. Nonetheless I will condense in a few points my own views on the topic (which on the single details sometimes agree with the above-mentioned studies, but do not accept *in toto* any of them):

1. As to the early period (from the late 4<sup>th</sup> century to the early-5<sup>th</sup> century) the reference material on the *Shu*-type commentary is very scanty: we only possess the *Zengyi ahan jing shu* 增義阿含經疏 (an unfinished commentary on the *Ekottarikāgama*)<sup>433</sup>; Daorong 道融's (355-434) *Weimo yishu* 維摩義疏 (only 1 entry preserved in T1775<sup>434</sup>); Sengrui's 僧叡 *Pimoluojieti yishu* 毘摩羅詰堤經義疏 (a *Vimalakīrtisūtra Commentary* of which the preface and some 20 entries quoted in other works have been preserved<sup>435</sup>)<sup>436</sup>. Based on such material, there is little doubt that - in the period considered - *Shu* meant "to record" or "to note down" what had been heard during the translation activity. This is confirmed by the use of the word *shu* in Sengrui's preface to his *Shu-Commentary* on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*: "Hence, during the oral explanation [of the *sūtra*] I have recorded (*shu* 疏) [those words] as an aid to my memory"<sup>437</sup>. Moreover, if one compares Sengrui's and Sengzhao's prefaces to the respective commentaries on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (of which the former is of a *Shu*-type and the latter of the *Zhu*-type<sup>438</sup>), he would hardly find any substantial difference in the intention expressed by their authors; in fact, they both claim they have recorded what they have heard during the translation of the *sūtra*, without adding anything on their own (this, however, is not to be taken at face value). Moreover, if we consider the surviving entries of Sengrui's commentary, we find that - as much as Sengzhao's commentary - they mostly focus on the explanation of the basic text, sometimes providing explanations of the words used<sup>439</sup>, in some cases *verbatim* reporting Kumārajīva's comments<sup>440</sup> and in some others

<sup>433</sup> On this work see Palumbo 2013: "*The Fenbie gongde lun* 分別功德論 (T.1507) [...] an unfinished commentary [...] whose real title was *Zengyi ahan jing shu* 增一阿含經疏, was produced within the first translation team - including Dharmananda, Zhu Fonian, Dao'an and Zhao Zheng - as a brand new format of exegesis, the *shu* 疏, a record of one or more lectures on the *sūtra* accompanied by extensive discussion of its contents. This exercise was performed with the greatest likelihood on the third redaction of the *Zengyi ahan jing* during the spring (April-June) of A.D. 385, and was brought to a sudden end by the death of Dao'an and the fall of Chang'an to the invading Xianbei forces after a prolonged siege" (*Op. cit.*, p. 268); moreover, "[the *Zengyi ahan jing shu*] may have been the very first instance of the new commentarial format, behind whose sudden appearance on the Chinese scene one perceives the novelty of the practice of the 'extensive explanation' which was the hallmark of the *Vaibhāṣikas*" (*Op. cit.*, p. 264)

<sup>434</sup> T1775, p. 371, c28-p. 372, a15

<sup>435</sup> The preface is found in *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], p. 58, c11-p. 59, a18. The surviving entries are found in T2777, T2778 and T1781.

<sup>436</sup> It is significant that Sengyou's *Chu sanzang jiji* (our earliest and most reliable Buddhist bibliographical work) only records the titles of the above mentioned *yishu*, adding to those only Daosheng's *yishu* works on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, *Lotus Sūtra*, *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* and *Lesser Prajñāpāramitā*, see T2145, p. 111, b5-6). The consistent number of *yishu* works ascribed to various early exegetes in the *Gaoseng zhuan* seems quite suspicious.

<sup>437</sup> 「是以即於講次疏以為記。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 59, a17); cf. also Sengrui's Preface to his *Yishu Commentary on the Siyi jing* 思益經義疏序: "at the time I (Sengrui) and Daoheng unworthily served as scribes. So, we recorded (*shu* 疏) those words and noted down (*ji* 記) those things" "「于時予與道恒謬當傳寫之任。輒復疏其言，記其事。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 58, a11-12). Cf. also Daoye's 道液 information: 「〔僧叡〕又疏記此經，及製序。」《淨名經關中釋抄》卷 1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2778, p. 511, b1-2)

<sup>438</sup> See Sengzhao's preface: "Hence I prepared some explanatory annotations (*zhujie* 注解) based on what I heard. I summarily recorded those ready-made explanations and related them without creating anything on my own." 「輒順所聞為之注解。略記成言，述而無作。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 327, b17-18)

<sup>439</sup> E.g. 《淨名經集解關中疏卷下》卷 2 (CBETA, ZW03, no. 25, p. 163, a4-5)

<sup>440</sup> E.g. 《維摩經義疏》卷 2 〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1781, p. 925, c20-26)

paraphrasing them<sup>441</sup>, at times elaborating more personal interpretations. The parceling method (*kepan* 科判<sup>442</sup>) is never applied<sup>443</sup>.

Being so, with regard to the early period, we might translate *yishu* 義疏 (“*Shu*-commentary”) as “Record of Meaning-Commentary”. With all probability, there was very little difference between these *yishu* and the *Zhu*-commentaries, the former being probably simply commentaries that for some reason were not inserted between the lines of the *sūtra* text and continued to circulate as independent works. However, since during the translation explanations were necessarily given sentence by sentence, these *yishu* had to closely follow the text and be mostly concerned with some primary hermeneutical issues implied.

2. During the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century the *yishu* commentaries become something else, *i.e.* interpretative works primarily related to the preaching activity rather than to translation, in which the parceling method (*kepan* 科判) plays a primary role as explanatory device<sup>444</sup>. Daosheng’s *Lotus Sūtra Shu-Commentary* (*Miaofa lianhua jing shu* 妙法蓮華經疏 [X0577], dating AD 432) is probably the earliest surviving work of this type.

As a matter of fact, when retrospectively examining the evolution of Buddhist exegesis, the Sui and Tang exegetes make a clear distinction between a “direct explanation” (*zhijie* 直解, *i.e.* a sentence by sentence explanation of the text, with no parceling) typical of the Kumārajīva’s school<sup>445</sup>, and the interpretative style developed in later times based on text parceling which gained dominance during the Liu-Song 劉宋 (420 - 479)<sup>446</sup>, particularly due to the monks Fayao 法瑤 (aka Xiaoshan Yao 小山瑤) and Daoping 道憑 (aka Guannei Ping 關內憑)<sup>447</sup>; these works evidently correspond to this second definition of *yishu*. Tang Yongtong accepts this ancient distinction and adds to it that, focusing on specific doctrinal matters instead of on the text in its

<sup>441</sup> E.g. 《淨名經集解關中疏》卷 1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2777, p. 441, b5-8)

<sup>442</sup> *Kewen* 科文 (or *kefen* 科分, *keduan* 科段, *kezhang* 科章, *keduan* 科節) represents a method by which the Buddhist exegetes interpreted *sūtras* and *śāstras*: the text was divided into several sections (the basic three-fold division consisted in “introduction” (*xu* 序), “main discourse” (*zhengwen* 正文, or *zhengshuo* 正說) and “dissemination” (*liutong* 流通).) for the convenience of better interpreting it. Carefully chosen concise definitions were applied for indicating the content of each of them.

The first adoption of this system is traced back to Dao’an, who called it *qijin* 起盡 (*lit.* beginning and end [of a section]). It is likely that in that early stage the *kewen* was but a simple device aiming at finding out the structure of the often chaotic translated texts and thus facilitating their comprehension. However, it slowly acquired a marked exegetical and pedagogical significance (it was easier to explain and to teach the text based on its sections) which was greatly developed in later times (on the features and history of *Kepan* see Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 415-419 and Zhang Bowei 2017)

<sup>443</sup> As to the quote found in 《淨名經集解關中疏卷下》卷 2 (CBETA, ZW03, no. 25, p. 136, a4-7), I hold that the parceling should not be included in Sengrui’s quotation (as the modern scholar Li Ming does in his edition of the text), since it represent Daoye’s own elaboration.

<sup>444</sup> As Kanno points out “the analytic division or parsing (*fenke* 分科) that constitutes the core content of commentaries of the ‘expository style’ is quite difficult to apply to inter-linear commentaries” (Kanno Hiroshi 2003, p. 303)

<sup>445</sup> See Zhanran’s abridgement of one of Zhiyi’s lectures on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*: 「什、生及古諸師，悉不開科段，直帖文解釋。」《維摩經略疏》卷 1 〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1778, p. 563, a15-16)

<sup>446</sup> See for example Jizang 吉藏 (549 - 623) 「問：尋天竺之與震旦，著筆之與口傳，敷經講論者，不出二種：一者科章門，二者直解釋。如天親解《涅槃》有七分，龍樹釋《般若》無章門，蓋是天竺論師開、不開之二類也。河西製《涅槃疏》開為五門，道融講新《法華》類為九轍，至如集《解淨名》之說、撰《注法華》之文，但拆其玄微，又不豫科起盡，蓋是震旦諸師開、不開兩義也。[...]」《法華義疏》卷 1 〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T34, no. 1721, p. 452, b16-28) ; see also the explanation given by the Tang monk Daoye 道液：「釋文大體略有二種：一關中注解，真明理宗諸禪師釋通但辯觀理，並造文便解，不開科段。又近代諸師，文起盡，各有科酌，而取捨多異。」《淨名經關中釋抄》卷 1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2778, p. 511, b21-24)

<sup>447</sup> See for example the Sui master Guanding 灌頂 (561-632): 「上代直唱消文釋意。分段起小山瑤、關內憑等。因茲成則。」《大般涅槃經疏》卷 1 〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1767, p. 42, a28-29)

entirety, these commentaries were considerably shorter than the old-time sentence by sentence explanations.<sup>448</sup>

The *yishu* exegetical style based on parceling may have originated from the preaching activity following the translation (and the concurrent textual annotation) of the Buddhist scriptures. We know for example that Daorong (one of Kumārajīva's disciples) when preaching on the newly translated *Lotus Sūtra* divided it into "nine tracks" (*jiu zhe* 九轍)<sup>449</sup>, and for this reason he was called "the master of the nine tracks". We can imagine how, after the meaning of the basic text had been sufficiently clarified through the sentence by sentence annotations accompanying the translation, another level started to be explored by focusing on more general and "abstract" issues, e.g. the motive behind the sūtra's origin, the essential doctrinal meaning hidden behind the word-level, the inner structure, the relation between that text and the other sūtras in the broader context of the Buddha's revelation through various turning of the dharma-wheel etc. Such new approach probably responded to the need of opening up new exegetical spaces and interpretative possibilities.

This finds a parallel in the evolution of the Confucian *yishu*. In fact, by the time of the Southern Dynasties the Confucian Classics were commonly read together with a certain authoritative *Zhu*-commentary, and the new *Shu*-exegesis was based on both the basic text and the chosen *Zhu*-commentary; this is why the *Shu* are also known as "sub-commentaries" (i.e. commentary of a commentary)<sup>450</sup>.

Deriving from the transcription and re-arrangement of oral lectures, the *Shu* 疏 character in their title maintained the original meaning of "recording", but at the same time acquired the additional meaning – which is already implicit in the character – of "leading to comprehension" (*shudao* 疏導), "organizing" (*shuli* 梳理), "making something smooth/coherent by eliminating obstructions/doubts" (*shutong* 疏通)<sup>451</sup>. For this reason, Kanno has – in this case – good reasons for translating *yishu* as "Exposition of meaning-commentary" (or Expository Commentary).

3. It is important to notice that the Sui exegetes also pointed out that the two above mentioned exegetical methods (the one dealing with the text in its entirety and the one based on parceling) were found in both the Indian and in the Chinese Buddhist *milieu*<sup>452</sup>. This makes us postulate that the commentarial modes used in Chinese Buddhism were influenced not only by the Confucian tradition but also to some extent by the Indian one.

Moreover, another fact that should be taken into account is that, during the Southern Dynasties the term *yishu* 義疏 was used by translators like Saṃghabhadra 僧伽跋陀羅 (Southern Qi, 479 -

<sup>448</sup> "大凡釋章句之注疏（此為文疏之始），其文較繁。出大意之注疏（此為義疏之始），其文必簡[...] 前者釋文而繁，後者談義而略" (Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 416)

<sup>449</sup> See on this the following important passage from Jizang's *Fahua Xuanlun*: 「及羅什至長安，翻新《法華》竟，道融講之開為九轍。時人呼為“九轍法師”。九轍之文，今所未見。講新《法華》始乎融也。」《法華玄論》卷1 (CBETA, T34, no. 1720, p. 363, c11-13)

<sup>450</sup> On the evolution of the Confucian *yishu* genre see Mou Runsun 1984, pp. 40 - 55, Zhang Baosan 2001, Makehan 2003, pp. 86 et seq. + appendix D; Van Zoeren, pp. 124 - 130; Dai Junren 1970 and Qiao Xiuyan 2013 (a)

<sup>451</sup> In the introduction to his *Lotus Sūtra Commentary* Daosheng explains the process through which his work was composed: "In my youth, I had the opportunity to attend some lectures sitting humbly in the end row of the hall. [...] Since what is stored in one's memory does not [endure] like mustard-seed kalpa and rock kalpa, one would find it impossible to keep it intact forever. Somehow on the days when there were lectures I just jotted down what I had heard of during the day (疏錄所聞). [...] Then, during the third month in the spring of the ninth year of the Yuan-chia era (432 A.D.), while residing at the Tung-lin ("Eastern Grove") Monastery (ching-she) on Lu-shan, again I put them in order and rearranged them (又治定之). In addition, after collecting and consulting various versions (採訪眾本), I edited them into one roll" (transl. from Kim 1990, pp. 348 - 349).

<sup>452</sup> Cf. 「尋天竺之與震旦，著筆之與口傳，敷經講論者不出二種：一者科章門，二者直解釋。如天親解《涅槃》有七分，龍樹釋《般若》無章門，蓋是天竺論師開、不開之二類也。河西製《涅槃疏》開為五門，道融講新《法華》類為九轍，至如集解《淨名》之說、撰注《法華》之文，但拆其玄微又不豫科起盡，蓋是震旦諸師開、不開兩義也。」《法華義疏》卷1〈序品1〉 (CBETA, T34, no. 1721, p. 452, b16-23)

502) and Paramārtha 真諦 (499 - 569) as a translation for the word “commentary”, and often indicates commentarial works produced in the Indian *milieu*<sup>453</sup>. So in this age an “overlapping of meanings” could have taken place and the deriving “ambiguity” might have become “productive” in shaping the new *yishu* format.

Based on the above considerations, we can state that Kumārajīva’s *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* is of the interlinear type<sup>454</sup> and that the materials included in it derive from a sentence by sentence explanation of the sūtra text which had been recorded by scribes and later revised by the master himself and - we might suppose - by various other editors along the centuries. The oral provenance of such material - which is proved by internal and external evidence - has already been stressed many times in this work and does not need further discussion.

As to Sengrui’s *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*, it seems that it was not different in nature from Sengzhao’s one, being a textual explanation including the information heard during the translation as well as some personal elaboration of it. It is likely that for some reason this work was not inserted into the sūtra text and circulated as an independent work at least up to the years 760 - 765 (Tang Dynasty) in which Daoye 道液 extrapolated from it some explanations and inserted them into his own *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentaries*<sup>455</sup>.

The exegetical formats of Sengzhao’s and Daosheng’s *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentaries* will be discussed respectively **in the sections 2.2.6 and 3.4 of this chapter**.

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<sup>453</sup> See for example the *Samantapāsādikā* 善見律毘婆沙 translated by Saṃghabhadra 「法師曰：「若觀隨本，不能自了者，應觀修多羅本義疏。俱等者取。」」《善見律毘婆沙》卷 6〈舍利弗品〉(CBETA, T24, no. 1462, p. 716, b27-29); 「問曰：「何謂為本？」」答曰：「一切毘尼藏，是名為本。諷誦通利者，若有人不以次第句問，不假思慮隨問能答。句義辯習者，律本句義善能分別，義及義疏，皆悉能解。」」《善見律毘婆沙》卷 6〈舍利弗品〉(CBETA, T24, no. 1462, p. 716, c10-14); 「若師猶在，應聽律藏及廣義疏，年年應受，非一過也」《善見律毘婆沙》卷 7〈舍利弗品〉(CBETA, T24, no. 1462, p. 723, a10-11); 「[...] 此大義疏出。」」《善見律毘婆沙》卷 7〈舍利弗品〉(CBETA, T24, no. 1462, p. 723, b15) [23]Mahāṭṭhakathā. See also the *Da sheng weishi lun* 大乘唯識論 translated by Paramārtha 真諦 in 563: 「此論外國本有義疏。」《大乘唯識論》卷 1 (CBETA, T31, no. 1589, p. 73, c20-21)

<sup>454</sup> Some fragments of manuscripts in found in Dunhuang prove that Kumārajīva’s explanation had been inserted in the sūtra text as early as the Northern and Southern Dynasties (see more on this in chapt. 3)

<sup>455</sup> Namely T2777 and T2778

## 2. Between light and darkness: Sengzhao's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Commentary

While Kumārajīva's commentary is likely to derive largely from the master's oral exegesis of the text, the materials included in Sengzhao's comment – notwithstanding the words used in his preface<sup>456</sup> – is only partly made up of Kumārajīva's explanations and actually constitutes as a whole a deep personal reelaboration of the themes presented in the sūtra and mediated by the foreign master's explanations. The materials reflecting Sengzhao's own philosophical elaboration are less conditioned by the immediateness of an improvised oral exposition (many passages are craftily constructed written compositions in the parallel prose style) and reveal a highly coherent and structured hermeneutical approach to the text deeply embedded in the Chinese literary tradition, philosophical mindset and cultural background.

The earliest biography of Sengzhao (which is found in the *Gaoseng zhuan* [T2059] vol. 6, p. 365, a9-p. 366, a29) mentions his commentary to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as one of his representative works<sup>457</sup>. Moreover, the monk's preface to the text<sup>458</sup> - excerpts from this document have been translated and commented in Chapt. 1 - well describes the circumstances in which the translation took place and his commentary was composed.

The fact that Sengzhao in 410 AD<sup>459</sup> sent a copy of the commentary as an attached to a letter to the recluse Liu Yimin of the Southern community of Mt. Lu<sup>460</sup> proves that the text was complete at least by that date, and also that it was originally an independent work.

### 2.1 Notes on Sengzhao's biography<sup>461</sup>

Since Sengzhao's commentary can be aptly investigated only by considering the broader background of the author's life, it will be useful to provide here a biographical sketch of Sengzhao (this will be mainly based upon his biography in *Gaoseng zhuan*), particularly highlighting his peculiar connection to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and the elaboration of an original exegetical approach to the Buddhist scriptures.

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<sup>456</sup> “On my own initiative I prepared some explanatory annotations 注解 based on what I heard. I summarily recorded those ready-made explanations and related them without creating anything on my own” 「輒順所聞而為注解，略記成言述而無作。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 58, b18-19)

<sup>457</sup> “Afterwards, [Seng]zhao also composed the [two] treatises *Emptiness of the Non-absolute* and *Things do not Shift*, and commented upon the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*; he also wrote prefaces to many sūtras and śāstras, which have been transmitted to the world. 「肇後又著《不真空論》、《物不遷論》等，并注《維摩》及製諸經論序，並傳於世。」《高僧傳》卷 6 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 365, b27-29)

<sup>458</sup> Cf. *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 8, p. 58, a16-b20

<sup>459</sup> This date is debated. We know from internal evidence that the letter was written on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> month of some year after the monk Zhi Faling 支法領 came back from his journey in Serindia (i.e. 408) (Cf. 「八月十五日。釋僧肇疏答。」《肇論》卷 1 (CBETA, T45, no. 1858, p. 155, b26) and 「領公遠舉，[...]於西域還」 *Ibidem*, p. 155, c10-11)). Tsukamoto dates the letter 409 (Tsukamoto 1955, p. 152a), while Tang Yongtong (whose choice I follow here) opts instead for 410.

<sup>460</sup> As we read in an important passage from the letter, “In the year 406 Kumārajīva has issued the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, and at that time I attended and listened to his exposition; in the idle moments when I was not busy with attending and listening I have then recorded those ready-made explanations entry by entry and arranged them into a[n interlinear] commentary. Even though the wording is not refined, nevertheless the meaning [it conveys] is directly based [on Kumārajīva's explanation]. Now, since the messenger has carried a copy [of it] to [you in] the South, you might, in your leisure, try and read it”. 「什法師以午年出《維摩經》，貧道時預聽次；參承之暇，輒復條記成言，以為注解。辭雖不文，然義承有本。今因信持一本往南。君閑詳試可取看。」《肇論》卷 1 (CBETA, T45, no. 1858, p. 155, c27-p. 156, a1)

<sup>461</sup> On Sengzhao's life and works see Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, pp. 246 - 254; Xu Kangsheng 1998; Tsukamoto Zeryū 1955; Robinson 1967, pp. 123 - 155. English translations of Sengzhao's works can be found in Robinson 1967, pp. 212 - 234, Liebenthal 1968 and Felbur 2017.



Sengzhao was born in the Chang'an area around 384. "His family was poor and he worked as a copyist [for making a living]. Due to [this activity of] reproducing texts he [had the chance to] read the Classics and the history works, and to extensively study the ancient documents"<sup>462</sup>. This familiarity with the Chinese Classics and the ability in writing developed since an early age was bound to play a fundamental role in the Sengzhao's later career of Buddhist-scholar and exegete.

In his early youth "[Sengzhao] had a keen interest in the 'mysterious subtleties' (*xuanwei* 玄微) and used to consider the *Zhuangzi* and the *Laozi* as conveying the essentials for cultivating the mind"<sup>463</sup>; all these elements revealing his personal philosophical interests immediately make us associate him to the Xuanxue philosophical discourse. In fact, the term "mysterious subtleties" originally indicated the mysterious and subtle principles constituting the object of the Xuanxue philosophical speculations; moreover texts like the above mentioned *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi*, together with the *Yijing* constituted a sort of "canon" for the Xuanxue adepts and provided them with some of the most favorite topics of discussions.

However – the biography relates – "once upon reading the *De* section (*De zhang* 德章) of the *Laozi* he sighed: 'It is certainly a fine [scripture], but as to pacifying the spirit and obliterating all hindrances it is still not perfect'"<sup>464</sup>. This partial dissatisfaction with the Daoist Classics was eventually mended by the Buddhist teachings. In fact, "afterwards he saw the old version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. He rejoiced and with deference received its teachings [in his heart]. After reading and pondering [on the scripture], he said: 'For the first time I know what to rely upon!', and left home [to become a monk]"<sup>465</sup>. It is because of the special role played by this scripture in his personal life that Sengzhao's connection with the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is a very strong one, and this leads us to hypothesize that the monk played a role in proposing the retranslation of the text.

Sengzhao's intimate connection to this scripture clearly emerges also from the frequency with which he refers to it in his own writings; for example, in the treatise *Buzhen kong lun* 不真空論 (*Emptiness of the non-absolute*) alone no less than three references to it are found<sup>466</sup>. Like many other monks and scholars of his age Sengzhao must even have identified to some extent with the figure of Vimalakīrti; we find evidence of this in his letter to the recluse Liu Yimin 劉遺民 of the Buddhist community of Mount Lu whose first line reads "we haven't met in the past but I have been thinking a lot about you"<sup>467</sup>, an expression that clearly echoes the welcome addressed to Mañjuśrī by Vimalakīrti as it is translated in the old version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*: "Mañjuśrī, it's very kind of you [to come see me], we haven't met in the past and I am glad to receive your visit"<sup>468</sup>.

At a very young age Sengzhao moved to Chang'an and thanks to his philosophical and rhetorical skills he gained a vast fame among the scholars of his age. His biography relates that "Sengzhao excelled in the study of the *Vaipulyasūtras*. He mastered the Tripiṭaka and when he was twenty years old he was [already] well known in Chang'an and the surrounding area. At that time, all those competing for fame could guess his early talent. Some of them came to Chang'an from a thousand li away carrying [a provision of] cereals on their shoulders in order to engage in debate [with him]. [Sengz]zhao was not only a deep thinker but also a skilled debater: taking advantage of the opportunities [inadvertently given by the opponents] he overcame them and [his eloquence] could never be arrested. At that time the elderly learned Confucians of the capital and

<sup>462</sup> 「家貧以傭書為業。遂因繕寫，乃歷觀經史，備盡墳籍」《高僧傳》卷6 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 365, a9-10)

<sup>463</sup> 「愛好玄微，每以莊老為心要。」《高僧傳》卷6 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 365, a10-11)

<sup>464</sup> 「嘗讀老子德章，乃歎曰。美則美矣。然期 (read as 棲) 神冥累之方，猶未盡善也。」《高僧傳》卷6 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 365, a10-13)

<sup>465</sup> 「後見舊維摩經，歡喜頂受。披尋翫味，乃言：『始知所歸矣！』因此出家」

<sup>466</sup> Cf. *Zhaolun* 肇論 [T1858], p. 152, b7-8; p. 152, b9-10 and p. 152, b23-24.

<sup>467</sup> 「不面在昔，佇想用勞」《肇論》卷1 (CBETA, T45, no. 1858, p. 155, b23)

<sup>468</sup> 「『勞乎文殊師利！不面在昔，辱來相見』」《佛說維摩詰經》卷1〈5 諸法言品〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 474, p. 525, c2-3)

the talented scholars from outside all admired his sharp dialectic, and those conceited ones [who wanted to compete with him] were all vanquished.”<sup>469</sup>

After Liangzhou 涼州 was conquered by the Later Qin troops led by Yao Shuode 姚碩德 (this happened in 401 AD), Sengzhao was sent there to meet Kumārajīva and accompany him back to Chang'an. Once arrived at the capital city, “[the king] Yao Xing 姚興 ordered [Seng]zhao, Sengruì and others to enter the Xiaoyao Park compound in order to help examine the sūtras and commentaries and establish [their correct readings]. Since long time had elapsed since the Sage[’s (i.e. the Buddha) age], the words [used in the sūtras] were mistaken and confused, and the previous interpretations [of those texts] were sometimes not in tune [with Buddhist doctrine] and incoherent.”<sup>470</sup>

As we know from some prefaces written by Sengzhao<sup>471</sup>, he became one of Kumārajīva’s trusted translation assistants and often served him as scribe. This daily collaboration with the great Kuchean translator helped Sengzhao a great deal in deepening his understanding of the Buddhist scriptures and their doctrines. After the re-translation of the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* 大品 (which took three years, from 403 to 405), he wrote a treatise entitled *Prajñā has no Knowledge* 般若無知論; when he showed it to Kumārajīva, the master “read and praised it, then said to Sengzhao: ‘My understanding equals yours, but as to the wording I ought to bow to you’”<sup>472</sup>.

In 408 Daosheng left Chang’an and headed south to Nanjing, on his way he stopped off at the Buddhist community of Mount Lu and handed the above mentioned treatise to the recluse Liu Yimin 劉遺民. The biography relates that:

時廬山隱士劉遺民見肇此論，乃歎曰：“不意方袍復有平叔”。因以呈遠公。遠乃撫几 (read with variant 幾) 歎曰：“未常有也”。因共披尋<sup>473</sup>翫味；更<sup>474</sup>存往復<sup>475</sup>，遺民乃致書肇[……]《高僧傳》卷6 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 365, a26-29)

At that time the recluse of Mt. Lu Liu Yimin read this treatise by Sengzhao and sighed: “I didn’t expect there was a [He] Pingshu among the clergy”. Then he showed the text to [Hui]yuan, who patted the table [with his hand in sign of admiration] and sighed: “Extraordinary!” So, they read the text together and pondered over it; however, there were still debated [points], so Yimin wrote a letter to [Seng]zhao [...]

These facts related to the treatise *Prajñā has no Knowledge* are quite eloquent and surely can help us better assess Sengzhao’s philosophical orientation. In fact, on the one hand the treatise in question was highly praised by his foreign master<sup>476</sup>, a fact which confirms its doctrinal “correctness”; on the other hand, the fact that the author was compared to He Pingshu 何平叔

<sup>469</sup> 「學善方等，兼通三藏，及在冠年而名振關輔。時競譽之徒，莫不猜其早達。或千里趨負 (read with variant 負糧) 入關抗辯。肇既才思幽玄，又善談說。承機挫銳，曾不流滯。時京兆宿儒及關外英彥，莫不挹其鋒辯，負氣摧衄」《高僧傳》卷6 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 365, a9-19)

<sup>470</sup> 「姚興命肇與僧叡等入逍遙園，助詳定經論。肇以去聖久遠，文義多 (read with variant 舛) 雜，先舊所解，時有乖謬」《高僧傳》卷6 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 365, a21-23)

<sup>471</sup> Cf. *Bailun xu* 百論序 T1569, p. 167, c11-p. 168, a14; *Zhu Weimojiejing xu* 注維摩詰經序 T1775, p. 327, a13-b18; *Chang Ahanjing xu* 長阿含經 T1, p. 1, a4-b6; *Fanwang jing xu* 梵網經 T1484, p. 997, a18-b5.

<sup>472</sup> 「讀之稱善，乃謂肇曰：“吾解不謝子，辭當相挹”」《高僧傳》卷6 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 365, a25-26)

<sup>473</sup> 披尋：閱讀、研究。猶“披味” (Wang Yunlu and Fang Yixin 1992, pp. 302 - 303)

<sup>474</sup> 更：〔副〕(1) 表示轉折的語氣。可譯為“卻”、“反而” (Ding Zhiqiao and Cai Jinghao 1994). Cf. also Cai Jinghao 1990, pp. 117 - 118.

<sup>475</sup> 往復：指賓主問答、清談；爭論、辯難 (Wang Yunlu and Fang Yixin 1992, pp. 378 - 380)

<sup>476</sup> Sengzhao is also credited with having been praised by Kumārajīva as “having reached a thorough understanding of [Buddhist] emptiness” 解空第一 (such information is related in *Zhaolun shu* 肇論疏 [T1859] by the Tang commentator Yuankang 元康 who quotes it from the now lost *Mingseng zhuan* 名僧傳)

(*alias* He Yan 何晏 (ca. 190 - 249), one of the most important early spokesmen of the Xuanxue philosophy) reveals that in the eyes of his contemporaries Sengzhao's philosophical approach and argumentative style formed a continuum with the Xuanxue speculations<sup>477</sup>. It is for this deeply Chinese re-interpretation of Indian ideas that Sengzhao's works were to be highly praised by the later Buddhist masters and he was to be considered the first patriarch of the Chinese Mādhyamika, the Three Treatises School (*Sanlun zong* 三論宗).

After *Prajñā has no Knowledge*, in 406 Sengzhao assisted Kumārajīva in the retranslation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and the notes he took during the translation were later re-elaborated into a commentary on the text.

Afterwards he composed other two treatises, namely the *Emptiness of the Non-absolute* 不真空論 and *Things do not Shift* 物不遷論. Since in both works quotes we find quotes from the *Zhonglun* 中論 (translated in 409), they must have been composed after 409.

In the year 413 Kumārajīva passed away and Sengzhao wrote for him an obituary (the *Jiumoluoshi fashi lei* 鳩摩羅什法師誄) which is still preserved in *Guang Hongming ji* 廣弘明集<sup>478</sup>. In the same period, while still mourning the master, a fourth treatise was composed by the monk, entitled *Nirvāṇa has no name* 涅槃無名論, which was greatly praised by the king Yaoxing and circulated among the members of the royal family<sup>479</sup>.

Sengzhao passed away in 414 at the age of 31, just one year after the Kuchean master he had studied and worked with for thirteen years.

## 2.2 Three major components of Sengzhao's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Commentary

In Sengzhao's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Commentary three major components can be identified, and it is on the basis of such fundamental constituents that I will undertake my analysis of it. These can be outlined as follows:

<sup>477</sup> It is a well known fact that even though positively influenced by the newly translated sūtras and śāstras, Kumārajīva's Chinese disciples re-elaborated the newly apprehended Buddhist doctrines in modes and styles that formed a continuum with the Chinese philosophical tradition, and in particular with the Xuanxue philosophical discourse. Tang Yongtong describes this phenomenon as follows: "during the Jin era the intellectual scene is dominated by Xuanxue and the Prajñā doctrines, which came to be studied together. The South had become the gathering place of pure conversations 清談 adepts while in the North the interest for the Mysterious Principles 玄理 had never faded away. Kumārajīva's disciples came from both places and were well versed in the Buddhist as well as in the secular literature, mastering all kinds of texts. Before Kumārajīva's arrival in Chang'an most of them had already reached a certain age and had obtained important intellectual achievements" (Tang Yongtong 2000, vol.1, p. 245). When characterizing the Buddhist exegesis during the Kumārajīva's era Zürcher also explains that: "the later 'exegesis' which came to flourish in the school of Kumārajīva at Chang'an in the first decades of the fifth century is no doubt spectacular and extremely important for the later history of Chinese Buddhism, but the originality of the ideas manipulated by thinkers like Sengzhao remains a problem. They had certainly undergone the stimulating influence of the new literature translated and orally elucidated by Kumārajīva, but their basic ideas and concepts as well as their method of argumentation still form a continuation of the earlier types of Buddhist Xuanxue such as developed by Dao'an at Xiang Yang and no doubt from there transplanted in Chang'an" (Zürcher 2007, p. 146). Cf. on this important matter also Tan Shibao 1991, pp. 326 - 331, in which the author points out that it would be misleading to consider Chinese exegetes like Sengzhao, Sengrui etc. as "Kumārajīva's disciples" *sensu stricto*, viz. implying a formal transmission and instruction master-disciple. Rather, they interacted with the śramaṇa from Kucha as equals posing questions and exchanging ideas while maintaining many of their own assumptions and beliefs. This is why in later times, when Kumārajīva had already passed away, they became founders of different schools and sects.

<sup>478</sup> [T2103], vol. 23, p. 264

<sup>479</sup> The attribution of this work is still a debated issue. For a comprehensive discussion of the problem see Xu Kangsheng 1998, pp. 26 - 40 and Xu Wenming 2002 (a). Tang Yongtong (cf. Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 5, p. 131) and his student Shi Jun (cf. Shi Jun 2006) both refuse the attribution to Sengzhao, the Japanese scholar Ochō Enichi instead accepts it (cf. Ochō 2002). Xu Kangsheng thinks that even though it was not written by Sengzhao, it reflects his views.

1. Speculative passages in which some key philosophical conceptions presented in the text are elaborated upon by using carefully constructed argumentative structures mainly written in the parallel prose style. This material forms a continuum with the Xuanxue exegesis (in particular with Wang Bi's commentarial style) and constitutes in my opinion the most original part of Sengzhao's commentary.

2. Passages that show a clear connection with Kumārajīva's commentary. These include Sengzhao's paraphrases of the master's explanation in which the same content is expressed with a slightly different wording or even *verbatim* transcribed, and also entries relating information on Sanskrit terms, Indian traditions, parables etc. which had been evidently heard from the Kuchean master but were not recorded in Kumārajīva's commentary.

3. Passages containing explanations which are significantly different from or alternative to Kumārajīva's comments. This category includes also many original explanations in which Sengzhao draws freely from the Chinese philosophical tradition (particularly from *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* and the *Yijing*<sup>480</sup>) and adapts those materials to the Buddhist *milieu* and to the specific needs of his exegesis.

Before discussing each of these categories, let me first focus on Sengzhao's general commentarial approach and his proximity to the views and methods elaborated by the Xuanxue tradition.

### 2.2.1 Sengzhao's exegetical framework and commentarial approach

In the eyes of Sengzhao the text he is commenting upon is essentially not different in nature from the Classics of the Confucian tradition. This is also revealed by the fact that, following a well established practice in Chinese exegesis<sup>481</sup>, he glosses the character *jing* 經 (scripture) in the title with *chang* 常 (constant). This association, which does not come as immediate and natural in Sanskrit, gives the clear impression that Sengzhao is here merging the foreign sūtra-type scriptures with the autochthonous *jing*-type authoritative writings<sup>482</sup>:

經 (肇曰：經者，常也。古今雖殊，覺道不改。群邪不能沮，眾聖不能異。故曰“常”也) 《注維摩詰經》卷 1 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 327, c13-14)

#### Sūtra

SZ: Sūtra means “constant”. Even though the past and the present are different, the Path leading to enlightenment remains unaltered [in time]. The host of evil cannot obstruct it, all the Sages [in their teaching] cannot diverge from it. This is why it is called “constant”<sup>483</sup>.

As much as the Classics of the Chinese tradition, which since the Western Han had come to occupy the core position in the Chinese taxonomy of knowledge, the sūtras are believed to explain the constant universal order (Dao 道, the Way) as it is revealed by the Sage (in this case

<sup>480</sup> Starting from the Wei-Jin period these three texts were collectively called the Three Mysteries 三玄 and represented a sort of “canon” for the Xuanxue exegetes

<sup>481</sup> See for example the Han dictionary *Shiming* 釋名: “*Jing* 經 ‘classic’ means *jing* 徑 ‘road’. It means the ‘constant standard’ (*changdian* 常典). Like a road, there is nothing it does not pass through, and it may be constantly employed” (Lewis's translation, see Lewis 199, p. 297)

<sup>482</sup> For a discussion of the differences between these two categories see FANG Guangchang 2015, pp. 4 - 5

<sup>483</sup> The same idea is also formulated in chapt. 13: [The profound sūtras (*shen jing* 深經)] are explained by all the buddhas of the ten directions and three periods of time (SZ: Even though the Buddhas are different, their Way is the same; even though past and present are distinct, their Way does not change. [This is said] in order to clarify that the sūtras exposing the supreme principle are constantly equal and do not present discrepancies [with one another]) 「十方三世，諸佛所說 (肇曰。諸佛雖殊，其道不二。古今雖異，其道不改。以明第一義經，常一不差也。[...])」 《注維摩詰經》卷 10 〈法供養品 13〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 416, b11-13)

the Buddha). However, the “subtle words” (*weiyán* 微言) of the Sage are hidden, concealed behind paradoxical images and apparently contradictory expressions, and need to be made clear by means of an exegetical effort.

In constructing his textual exegesis Sengzhao largely relies upon hermeneutical conceptions developed by the Xuanxue tradition, to the point that it would be impossible to understand his approach to the text without explaining his connection with this important Chinese philosophical “school”.

A typical feature of the Xuanxue commentarial approach is the preliminary identification of the general, fundamental meaning (variously called *dazhi* 大旨, *zongzhi* 宗旨, *dayi* 大意) of the text which encompasses all its chapters giving it unity and inner coherence. From this point of view, the various statements made in the text are like the branches of a tree (*mo* 末) which spread in different directions and greatly diverge from each-other but yet depart from the same tree whose invisible root (the fundamental meaning) is deeply grounded in the soil.

On the hermeneutical level, this assumption leads to the formulation of two different dimensions: the first deals with the ultimate meaning of the text, which the commentator assumes as being the insight the Sage wanted to transmit to the reader; this is defined as mysterious, obscure, hard to fathom etc. and can only be described in an apophatic way. The second relates to the visible traces (*ji* 迹) left by the Sage<sup>484</sup>, which are the bare words of the text, and represent the imperfect but necessary means for expressing that subtle, deep fundamental meaning.

Under this perspective, the task of the commentator is to show the connection between the word-level and the deep undelying meaning. He must not confine himself to the examination of the surface text, because “the words do not fully convey the meaning” 言不盡意; his aim should rather be that of using the words as means to fathom the inexpressible, like a fisherman uses the net for catching the fish<sup>485</sup>.

Sengzhao in his exegetical practice accepts these presuppositions and adapts them to his specific needs. He identifies the core conception underlying the whole sūtra as the “Inconceivable” 不可思議. This is described in his preface<sup>486</sup> as follows:

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<sup>484</sup> The metaphor of the traces left by the Sage derives from *Zhuangzi*; in the chapter *Tianyun* we read that “The Six Classics are the traces left by the former kings, they are definitely not the that-by-which those traces were left” 夫六經，先王之陳跡也，豈其所以跡哉! (*Tianyun* 天運 chapter). The eminent Xuanxue exegete Guo Xiang 郭象 commented as follows: “The that-by-which is the True Nature. The traces left by those who recognized the True Nature of things are the Six Classics” 所以跡者，真性也。夫任物之真性者，其跡則六經也 (*Zhuangzi Commentary* 莊子注, *Tianyun* 天運)

<sup>485</sup> See as an example Wang Bi’s *Zhouyi lüeli*: “Images are the means to express ideas. Words [i.e., the text] are the means to explain the images [...] Thus, since the words are the means to explain the images, once one gets the images, he forgets the words, and, since the images are the means to allow us to concentrate on the ideas, once one gets the ideas, he forgets the image. Similarly “the rabbit snare exists for the sake of the rabbit; once one gets the rabbit, he forgets the snare. And the fish trap exists to for the sake of the fish; once one gets the fish, he forgets the trap. If this is so, then the words are snares for the images, and the images are traps for the ideas” (trad. John Richard Lynn, p. 31)

<sup>486</sup> The first part of Sengzhao’s preface to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* constitutes a true key for understanding his textual exegesis; in fact, it outlines the bare conceptual structure he had in mind when commenting the text. This particular use of the preface (as outlining the underlying structure of the text and introducing to the commentary) owns much to the *lüeli* 略例 genre which made its appearance during the Later Han and the Sanguo period and was used so brilliantly by Wang Bi. Wagner quotes the following passage from the *Zhouyi lüeli zhu* 周易略例注 by the Tang dynasty writer Xing Shou 邢璣 which explains: “*Lüeli* is a term for comprehensively explaining the structure (*gangmu* 綱目) and a designation of systematically illuminating the literary organization (*wenli* 文理) of a work.... [Wang Bi] wrote the [Zhouyi] *Lüeli* in order to refute the errors of the different schools and to give a systematical exposition of the entire organization [of the Zhouyi] (Wagner 1986, p. 98).

超群數之表。絕有心之境。眇莽無為而無不為，罔知所以然而能然者，不思議也。《注維摩詰經》卷 1 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 327, a16-18)

What is beyond all mental categories, above the realm of discriminative thought, what is mysteriously inactive and yet doesn't leave anything unaccomplished, what can be so without [anybody] knowing the reasons [why]: [that is called] "Inconceivable".

The idea that this conception encompasses the whole scripture representing its most subtle and essential meaning is repeated many times throughout the commentary. See the following quotes, and notice in particular the third one in which the term is considered an equivalent of *wuxiang* 無相 ("absence of characteristics", i.e. emptiness) and *wuer* 無二 ("non-duality"):

此經始自于淨土，終于法供養。其中所明雖殊，然其不思議解脫一也。《注維摩詰經》卷 1 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 327, c26-28)

This sūtra starts with [the chapter on] the «Buddha Lands» and ends with [the chapter] «Bestowal of the Dharma». Even though the topics explained in it are many, the Inconceivable Emancipation constitutes their common [insight].

此經自始于淨土終于法供養。其中所載大乘之道，無非不思議法者也。《注維摩詰經》卷 6 〈不思議品 6〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 382, b10-11)

This sūtra, starts with [the chapter on] the «Buddha Lands» and ends with [the chapter] «Bestowal of the Dharma». All the Mahāyāna doctrines conveyed in it are but [different formulations] of the teaching of the inconceivable.

自經始已來所明雖殊，然皆大乘無相之道。無相之道，即不可思議解脫法門，即第一義無二法門。此淨名現疾之所建、文殊問疾之所立也。凡聖道成，莫不由之。故事為篇端，談為言首。究其所歸，一而已矣。然學者開心有地，受習不同：或觀生滅以反本，或推有無以體真，或尋罪福以得一，或察身口以冥寂。其塗雖殊，其會不異。不異故取眾人之所同，以證此經之大旨也。《注維摩詰經》卷 8 〈入不二法門品 9〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 396, c14-23)

Even though the topics explained since the beginning of the sūtra are many, nevertheless they all belong to the Mahāyāna doctrine of the 'absence of Characteristic' (i.e., emptiness) which in turn corresponds to the dharma teaching of the Inconceivable Emancipation and to the Ultimate Truth [expressed by] Non-duality. This is what Vimalakīrti's pretended illness is based upon, [this is] what Mañjuśrī's condolence [visit] is grounded on. The accomplishment of all spiritual practices derives from it. That is why ['non-duality'] constitutes the title of this chapter and Vimalakīrti refers to it right in the beginning of his speech; if one inquires [the basic meaning on which this scripture] relies upon, this is only one. Yet, those who study [the text] may have different levels of understanding and different karmic predispositions, [so that] some of them return to the Ultimate upon observing the production and annihilation (Skr. *utpādanirodha*) [of all things], some others realize the Truth after being presented with [the inconsistency of the views based on] existence and inexistence; some achieve Oneness upon discerning [the karmic consequences of] sins and good actions, and some others mingle with nirvāṇa upon [carefully] surveiling their actions and speech. Even though they follow different paths, their final goal is the same. That is why this common goal is used for confirming the comprehensive meaning 大旨 of this sūtra.

此經大旨所明，不思議道。故往往多顯不思議迹也《注維摩詰經》卷 9 〈菩薩行品 11〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 403, b12-14)

The general conception elucidated in this sūtra is the Teaching of the Inconceivable. That is why the traces of the Inconceivable are copiously displayed everywhere [in the text].

According to Sengzhao, the Inconceivable includes two different aspects, which we might call substance and manifestation.

The *fundamental, hidden aspect* (*ben* 本, the root) is constituted by a number of core conceptions which are given particular importance in the commentary, namely Skillful Means and Wisdom 權智, the Six Perfections 六度, Compassion 慈悲 and Non-duality 不二<sup>487</sup>. Among these, the first one is regarded as the most fundamental one, in that it somehow includes and embodies all the others<sup>488</sup>.

*The visible manifestation* of the Inconceivable (*ji* 迹, the traces) is instead constituted by all the extraordinary miraculous events described in the text<sup>489</sup> which function as the narrative building blocks of the plot through which the highest Buddhist teachings are revealed.

For the sake of clarity, the underlying structure of Sengzhao's exegesis of the sūtra can be outlined as follows<sup>490</sup>:

不可思議 “The inconceivable”	不可思議之本：權智、(六度、慈悲、不二) <b>The fundamental aspect of the inconceivable: skill in means and wisdom, (the Six Perfections, compassion, non-duality)</b>
	不可思議之迹：借座燈王、請飯香土、手接大千、室包乾象。 <b>The visible traces (or “outward manifestation”) of the inconceivable:</b> [scenes which are found in the sūtra] like the “borrowing of [thirty-two] lion seats from the [Sumeru] Lamp King”, “asking for food to the buddha of the Host of Fragrances”, “holding the great congregation with the hand [and lifting it]”, “[Vimalakīrti's] room containing [innumerable] celestial phenomena” [etc.]

As to the ultimate meaning of the Inconceivable, which - as said above - is essentially embodied in **Skill in Means** and **Wisdom**, a more in depth explanation is given by Sengzhao in an argumentative passage of his commentary which is craftily constructed in the parallel prose style (seen the next section on the features of this style and its importance in Sengzhao's exegesis):

When the visible traces of the Inconceivable are displayed outwards,	there must be an Inconceivable Virtue manifested inwards;
If we inquire about the fundamental aspect [of the Inconceivable], [we find that] this is constituted just by <u>Skillful Means</u> and <u>Wisdom</u> (prajñā).	
Why is it so?	

<sup>487</sup> Sengzhao clearly states in his preface: “as to the exposition undertaken in this sūtra, in compendiating all the practices [of the bodhisattva] the Gnosis [working through] expedients is considered most important; in planting the roots of merit the Six Perfections are considered most fundamental; in helping the deluded [beings] compassion is seen as the capital [virtue]; in expounding the ultimate principles [of the doctrine] non-duality is considered the main teaching. All these expressions represent ‘the inconceivable’ in its fundamental aspect.” 「此經所明，統萬行則以權智為主；樹德本則以六度為根；濟蒙惑則以慈悲為首；語宗極則以不二為門。凡此眾說，皆不思議之本也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 327, a27-b1)

<sup>488</sup> This is confirmed by the following quotes from Sengzhao's *Commentary*: 1. 「權智此經之關要」《注維摩詰經》卷 5 〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 379, c12); 2. 「夫有不思議之迹顯於外。必有不思議之德著於內。覆尋其本權智而已乎。」《注維摩詰經》卷 6 〈不思議品 6〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 382, a29-b1); 3. 「故權智二門為不思議之本也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 6 〈不思議品 6〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 383, b19-20)

<sup>489</sup> Cf. Sengzhao's preface: “[scenes which are found in the sūtra] like the borrowing of [thirty-two] lion seats from the [Sumeru] Lamp King, asking for food to the buddha of the Host of Fragrances, holding the great congregation with the hand [and lifting it], [Vimalakīrti's] room containing [innumerable] celestial phenomena [etc.] represent the Inconceivable in its outward manifestation (*lit.* the traces of the Inconceivable).” 「至若借座燈王、請飯香土、手接大千、室包乾象，不思議之迹也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 327, b1-3)

<sup>490</sup> This is but a visual rearrangement of Sengzhao's own words.



[Possessing] wisdom, there is no darkness that is not enlightened, when darkness is enlightened, the principle [of Emptiness] reaches the utmost;

Merits are gained in non-gaining, hence they are achieved through Oneness;

Wisdom extends to all things and has no reflection<sup>491</sup>;

[possessing] Skill in Means, there is no Virtue which is not cultivated, when all Virtues are cultivated all merits are gained.

the utmost of the principle [of Emptiness] resides in the unlimited, hence it is understood through Vacuity.

Hence,

Skill in Means accumulates all Virtues and has no merits

What is mysterious and inactive, and yet does not leave anything unaccomplished, this is the utmost of the Inconceivable<sup>492</sup>.

In this exposition the two fundamental elements of Skill in Means and Wisdom on a surface level appear to be the “agents” of the active processes of “enlightening [obscurity]” (*zhao* 照) and “[gaining] merits” (*gong* 功) through the “cultivation of Virtue” (*xiu de* 修德); having a specific task and being determined in their scope, they surely cannot represent the all-encompassing ultimate truth. However, seen from a deeper perspective their activity resembles that of the Tao which - as it is described in *Laozi* - is “constantly inactive, and yet there is nothing it leaves unaccomplished”<sup>493</sup>. Being mysterious and elusive, no actual definition can be applied to Skill in Means and Wisdom, being inactive no specific activity or target can be attributed to them; in other words, their name is actually a no-name, their action is a non-action. Being so, they can fully represent the original mysterious truth which forms the unspeakable essence of the text.

The above translated passage proceeds to explaining the visible manifestation of the Inconceivable (i.e. the miraculous events which constitute the plot of the text) and its significance:

巨細相容，殊形並應。此蓋耳目之龜迹，遽足以言乎？然將因末以示本，託龜以表微。故因借座略顯其事耳。《注維摩詰經》卷 6 〈不思議品 6〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 382, b7-9)

The huge and the minute contain each other, the different shapes are all responded to. How can the perceivable rough traces express [such subtle meaning]? But [the text] will rely on the branches for revealing the root, it will make use of the rough for conveying the subtle. That is why [the text] uses [the image of] the “borrowing of the seats” [and other similar ones] to roughly manifest such [unfathomable] content.

But what is then the relation between definitions and ultimate meaning, between the written words of the text and the absolute to which they point to? Again, in perfect Xuanxue style and almost paraphrasing Wang Bi 王弼 Sengzhao clearly states:

<sup>491</sup> The “reflection” (*zhao* 照) illuminating the truth and dissolving the darkness of ignorance is considered to be the activity of Wisdom 智.

<sup>492</sup> 「夫有不思議之迹顯於外，必有不思議之德著於內。覆尋其本，權智而已乎。何則？智無幽而不燭，權無德而不修。無幽不燭故理無不極，無德不修故功無不就。功就在于不就故一以成之，理極存于不極故虛以通之。所以智周萬物而無照，權積眾德而無功。冥冥無為而無所不為，此不思議之極也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 6 〈不思議品 6〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 382, a29-b7)

<sup>493</sup> “道常無為而無不為” (*Laozi* 37)

肇曰。文者何耶？妙旨之蹄筌耳。而新學智淺，未能忘言求理。捨本尋末，唯文飾是好。  
《注維摩詰經》卷 10〈囑累品 14〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 418, b16-18)

What do the written words represent? They are like fishnets and traps for sizing the marvellous [ultimate] meaning. But the neophytes have a shallow wisdom and are not able to forget the words and pursue the principle [that is behind them]; they forsake the fundamental and pursue the accessory (*lit.* they forsake the root and pursue the branches), being only interested in the literary refinement [of the bare words of the text].

Indeed, the often paradoxical words of the scripture seem contradictory and puzzling, a feature which makes even harder for the reader to grasp the ultimate truth which is hidden behind them. Only possessing a special perspicacity and wisdom could he be able to fulfil the task:

肇曰。妙旨幽深，微言反俗。自非智勇，孰能深入耶。《注維摩詰經》卷 10〈囑累品 14〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 418, b19-20)

The marvelous [ultimate] meaning is obscure and deep, the subtle words [which convey it] contravene the common sense. How would it be possible to deeply comprehend it without being wise and courageous?

In Sengzhao's view of language a new element, typically Buddhist, is added to the Xuanxue theories *i.e.* the need to adapt one's saying to the specific faculties and predispositions of the beings in order to respond to their needs and lead them into the Buddhist path of salvation. In his preface Sengzhao explains that "the beings are immersed in the long sleep [of ignorance] and it would be impossible to wake them up without using words. The doctrine is not itself active; it is up to men to spread it"<sup>494</sup>; moreover, "the mysterious pass [leading to the comprehension of the doctrine] is difficult to open up, that is why the Sage [changes his teachings] reflecting the different needs of the beings. Without the fundamental [aspect] it is impossible to leave the traces, and without the traces it is impossible to display the fundamental. Even though the fundamental and the traces are different, they are equal in their being inconceivable"<sup>495</sup>.

### 2.2.2 Sengzhao's philosophical elaboration on some key Buddhist conceptions and his use of the parallel prose style

Keeping the above described exegetical framework as reference, Sengzhao often focuses on certain concepts presented in the text and elaborates at length on them; the great majority of these argumentative passages are constructed in the interlocking parallel prose style (*pianwen* 駢文), a form of written exposition which acquires in Sengzhao's writing important philosophical implications. In this section I will start with providing some basic information on the characteristics and technical features of the *pianwen* style, then I will proceed to the analysis and discussion of some of Sengzhao's *pianwen* philosophical compositions.

In the term *pianwen* 駢文, the character *pian* 駢 means "two horses pulling together"; indeed, this style - which is used in extra-poetic literary genres - is characterized by "a preponderance of couplets in which metrical identity (most often four or six graphs) and syntactical parallelism occur between corresponding lines [...] A second important aspect [of it] is a preponderance of grammatical and lexical pairing of one or more graphs of the first couplet with the corresponding graphs of its successor [...] A final characteristic of the parallel prose is an abundance of tropes. No understanding of *pianwen* would be possible without penetrating the complexity of its figurative language, a natural outgrowth of the brevity of the style and of the freedom provided

<sup>494</sup> 「然群生長寢非言莫曉。道不孤運。弘之由人」《注維摩詰經》卷 1 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 327, a24-25)

<sup>495</sup> 「幽關難啟。聖應不同。非本無以垂跡。非跡無以顯本。本跡雖殊而不思議一也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 327, b3-5)

within its prosodic structures to explore the graphic, tonal, metrical, and semantic qualities of the language”<sup>496</sup>.

The famous *literatus* Liu Xie 劉勰 (fl. 5<sup>th</sup> century) in his capital work on literary theory *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of this style (chapt. 35, *Lici* 麗辭, *Linguistic Parallelism*). According to him the *pianwen* reproduces in the process of literary composition a natural law common to all things in the universe:

Nature, creating living beings, endows them with limbs in pairs. The divine reason operates in such a way that nothing stands alone. The mind creates literary language, and in doing this it organizes and shapes one hundred different thoughts, making what is high supplement what is low, and spontaneously producing linguistic parallelism<sup>497</sup>.

As to the origins and development of *pianwen*, this style was first employed in the *fu* 賦 compositions where it served to articulate the writer’s emotions and ideas. As Wagner has pointed out<sup>498</sup>, in the pre-Qin literature we already find examples of it in the philosophical literature, but mostly in form of short passages embedded in larger texts. The *Laozi* stands out as the text that most extensively employed this style, to the point that a great portion of it is written in this fashion.

During the Wei Period (220 - 265), when writing his *Commentary* on the *Laozi* Wang Bi 王弼 “extracted” from the text itself the use of this style and highly systematized it adapting it to his exegetical purposes. Given the great importance of this commentary throughout the Medieval period as well as Wang Bi’s influence as a Xuanxue philosopher, this style became the “basic stylistic mode of discourse on the Dark, *xuan* 玄 and the Dao” and it was adopted by many authors of essays, prefaces, and commentaries along the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries who “[...] used a rich variety of stylistic devices rooted in parallel style and linked to the philosophical problematic of overcoming the limits of definitory language in handling core philosophical categories”<sup>499</sup>.

It goes without saying that the Buddhist scholar-monks who had grown up in the Xuanxue milieu like Dao’an, Huiyuan and most of Kumārajīva’s disciples would also naturally write their essays and commentaries in this style. Among them, Sengzhao is perhaps the author who most extensively used the parallel prose in his writings: his famous four treatises preserved in *Zhaolun* 肇論 [T1858]<sup>500</sup> are almost entirely constructed in this style and are among the finest examples of Buddhist *pianwen*<sup>501</sup>; moreover - as it had been mentioned above - this style also plays a key role in the composition of the many argumentative passages of his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*.

<sup>496</sup> Nienhauser 1986, pp. 656 - 661

<sup>497</sup> “造化賦形，支體必雙；神理為用，事不孤立。夫心生文辭，運裁百慮，高下相須，自然成對” Transl. by Vincent Shih (Shih 1959, p. 190)

<sup>498</sup> Cf. Wagner 2000, esp. pp. 62 - 113

<sup>499</sup> Wagner 2000, p. 56

<sup>500</sup> As Robinson has pointed out, “these essays were formative in the thinking of the New Three Treatise Sect, during the sixth century. They constitute the largest surviving set of documents on the earliest Chinese Mādhyamika thought” (Robinson 1967, p. 123)

<sup>501</sup> Also in the eyes of the modern scholar Tang Yongtong, the primary value of Sengzhao’s treatises is found in their literary style: “[These treatises] combine together Chinese and Indian theories and show a deep understanding of the relation between “substance” and “function” [one of the most fundamental ontological issues discussed by Xuanxue]. Moreover, Sengzhao expressed his views in an extremely beautiful and powerful literary style, to the point that his works are among the most valuable literary achievement in the field of Chinese philosophy [...] 融會中印之義理，於體用問題，有深切之證知。而以極優美極有力之文字表達其義。故為中華哲學文字最有價值之著作也。(Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 250 ).

In order to approach Sengzhao's application of this style and its philosophical implications, let us first consider the following passage elaborating on the two concepts of Wisdom and Skill in means which has been translated above on pp. 122 - 123:

1a 夫有不思議之迹顯於外，1b 必有不思議之德著於內。

2c 覆尋其本，權、智而已乎。

3c 何則？

4a 智無幽而不燭，4b 權無德而不修。

5a 無幽不燭故理無不極，5b 無德不修故功無不就。

6a 功就在于不就故一以成之，6b 理極存于不極故虛以通之。

7c 所以

8a 智周萬物而無照，8b 權積眾德而無功。

9c 冥冥無為而無所不為。

10c 此不思議之極也。

《注維摩詰經》卷 6 〈不思議品 6〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 382, a29-b7)

Three fundamental components have been pointed out by the use of letters *a*, *b* and *c*: *a* and *b* identify the parallel verses within the same line, while *c* indicates the non-parallel elements<sup>502</sup> in between lines which can either serve as connecting-links between different blocks of lines (expressing a turning point, a cause-effect relation, or enhancing the sequence through a rhetorical question *etc.*), or represent statements which are referred to both the *a* and *b* sequences. The numbers indicate the lines formed by the alternance of *a+b* and *c* elements<sup>503</sup>.

In articulating his philosophical discourse on the basis of *pianwen*, Sengzhao usually starts by introducing two key elements in the specular verses *a* and *b*; then the *a* sequence elaborates upon the first one and the *b* sequence on the second. These two parallel “argumentative sequences” eventually converge into a statement referring to both (a *c* element) which constitutes a sort of “harmonious reconciliation” of the seemingly contradictory elements discussed (this comes mostly at the end of the whole passage).

We can notice how in the above example the verses 1a/1b, 4a/4b, 5a/5b, 6a/6b, 8a/8b are related to each other by means of metrical identity and syntactical parallelism. In terms of content, segments 1a and 1b are linked by the opposition traces-external//Virtue-internal; then starting from verse 2 the argumentation focuses on the internal aspect, whose basic constituents are Wisdom (*zhi* 智) and Skill in Means (*quan* 權). From verse 4 onwards the *a* sequence (4a-5a *etc.*) elaborates upon the concept of Wisdom while the *b* sequence (4b-5b *etc.*) focuses on Skill in Means. There is one notable exception in verse 6, which presents a chiasmic variation by which 6a relates to 5b and 6b relates to 5a. The lines 9c and 10c constitute a conclusive harmonization of the *a* and the *b* lines and a re-formulation of Wisdom and Skill in Means as two parts of a deeper organic unity in which both are reaffirmed and exceeded at the same time.

By casting the two terms into the mold of the parallel prose Sengzhao creates a sort of “dynamic tension” between them: on the one side, Wisdom is the light that illuminates darkness and makes the principle clear; on the other, Skill in Means serves to practice the virtues and accumulate merits. However, the utmost of the principle resides in the unlimited, and only through Emptiness (*xu* 虛) one can fathom it; merits are gained in non-gaining, and only through Oneness (*yi* 一) they can be achieved. Emptiness and Oneness are but two sides of the same truth and, when seen through them, Wisdom actually illuminates without shining and Skill in Means helps the beings without merit. The conclusion is a pure Taoist-like formulation: “What is

<sup>502</sup> Occasional non-parallel elements (or “extra-metrical graphs”) can also be found at the beginning of an *a-b* line, but in order to simplify things a bit I do not point them out.

<sup>503</sup> Even though in this analysis of the *pianwen* I rely on Wagner's findings, the notation I use is different from his.

mysterious and inactive, and yet does not leave anything unaccomplished, this is the utmost of the Inconceivable.”

As we look at this particular form of philosophical elaboration against the broader background of the Xuanxue philosophical discourse, we find that the relation between Wisdom and Skill in Means (as well as that between the Principle [of emptiness] (*li* 理) and Merit - or “success”, “efficacy” - (*gong* 功) basically reproduces the fundamental Xuanxue relation between Substance (*ti* 體) - or “stillness” (*jing* 靜) - and “activity” (*yong* 用) - or “motion” (*dong* 動) -<sup>504</sup> and the aim of the argumentation is to find a “harmonious synthesis” between the two.

Even though a close interaction between Skill in Means and Wisdom is suggested by the text itself<sup>505</sup>, no such articulated elaboration on those conceptions is found in the whole sūtra; such formulation - and such exegetical approach *tout court* - is also absent from Kumārajīva’s commentary (cf. the section “Upāya and its relation to transcendental wisdom”, pp. 91 - 92) and constitutes Sengzhao’s unmistakable trademark.

The *pianwen* elaborations on other key Mahāyāna conceptions undertaken by Sengzhao throughout his commentary follow the same basic patterns, and lead to the fundamental observation that far from being a simple stylistic device, the *pianwen* - which with its rhythm, binary progression and complementary oppositions reproduced in the process of literary composition the natural law of the universe and reflects the articulation of the Chinese way of thinking - played a key role in Sengzhao’s adaptation of the Indian Mādhyamika to philosophical patterns familiar to the Chinese mind.

But before better articulating this important point let us consider some other examples of Sengzhao’s philosophical elaboration. Since it would be difficult to grasp the complex visual texture of these compositions through an unilinear reading, I will try my best to reproduce in the English translation the almost geometrical structure of the original<sup>506</sup>.

## Existence and inexistence

Existence and inexistence are two categories frequently discussed by Sengzhao, however in a rather different fashion than Kumārajīva. As we have seen (cf. pp. 91 - 92), the latter in his comment admits the possibility of an alternative use of the conceptions of “existence” and “inexistence” as upāyic pedagogical means for addressing different beings and leading them into the Buddhist Path; instead, when dealing with them in ontological terms, he closely follows the classical Mādhyamika method of falsification, which leads to the rejection of both concepts based on the impossibility to establish them as absolutely existing entities. See for example the following comment:

什曰：若法定有，則不生滅。若法全無，亦不生滅。不生滅，則與因緣相違。深經所說“非有非無”，非有非無，故順因緣法也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 10〈法供養品 13〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 415, c22-25)

K: If the dharmas were definitely existent, they would not have arising and extinction. If they were completely inexistent, they would equally not have arising and extinction. Being without arising and extinction they would contravene the interdependent origination. When the profound

<sup>504</sup> This is also confirmed by the following passage from Sengzhao’s *Commentary*: “Skill in Means is another activity of Wisdom” (the primary activity being “to illuminate” 照)「方便者，即智之別用耳。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 329, b15-16)

<sup>505</sup> See for example: “The perfection of wisdom is the bodhisattva’s mother; Skillful means is his father” (*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, chapt. 8 (MR, p. 136)) and “to be without wisdom is to have one’s skillful means in bondage, while to have wisdom is to have one’s skillful means emancipated” (*Ibidem*, chapt. 5 (MR, p. 112)).

<sup>506</sup> Cf. Wagner’s important remark: “The conventional unilinear reading of phrase after phrase must be abandoned in favor of a spatial reading aimed at mentally constructing the complex macro- and microstructures of the statement; only the understanding of this structure will enable the reader to grasp the meaning of the statement” (Wagner 2000, p. 66).

sūtra (i.e. the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*) says “neither existent nor inexistent”, it means that it is because [all phenomena] are neither existent nor inexistent that they [can] accord with the dharma of causes and conditions.

As to Sengzhao’s approach to these two categories, let us consider his comment to the sūtra sentence “you say that dharmas are neither existent nor inexistent”<sup>507</sup>:

[Existence]	[Inexistence]
<b>1a</b> If you want to say that [dharmas] are existent, then [be aware that] the “existent” was not self-generated.	<b>1b</b> If you want to say that [dharmas] are inexistent, then [be aware that] they have been shaped through conditions.
<b>2a</b> If something is not self-generated you can’t call it “existent”.	<b>2b</b> If something is shaped through the concurrence of [different] conditions you can’t call it “inexistent”.
<b>3a</b> It is only because there is something called “existent” that we have something called “inexistent”.	<b>3b</b> It is only because there is something called “inexistent” that we have something called “existent”.
So without “existence” how could there be any “inexistence”?	So without “inexistence” how could there be any “existence”?
<b>4c [Conclusion:]</b> Being so, then <b>5c</b> “self-existence” is not a [real] existence; a “self-inexistence” is not a [real] inexistence.	
<b>6c</b> This is the correct argumentation of the dharma King <sup>508</sup>	

As it is evidenced also through the spacial reading of the passage, in his *pianwen* construction Sengzhao carries along two parallel argumentative sequences, one discussing the point of view of “existence” and the other that of “inexistence [of the dharmas]”. In lines 1 and 2 both conceptions are questioned and eventually discarded on the basis of the interdependent origination (*yuanqi* 緣起<sup>509</sup>), a procedure which concides with the one used by Kumārajīva; however, line 3 of the composition as well as the overall argumentative structure based on the stylistic patterns of *pianwen* clearly suggest that in the eyes of the exegete the true reason for refusing the concepts of existence and inexistence lies in their being partial and one-sided rather than in their being inherently inconsistent; in other words, the two are envisioned as mutually cooperative rather than mutually exclusive.

Evidently, Sengzhao tends not to emphasize the Indian logical methods of falsification of hypostatized entities but focuses instead *more sinico* on the mysterious and ultimately inexpressible dynamic harmony between opposite forces: it is precisely because of their being

<sup>507</sup> 「說法不有亦不無。」《注維摩詰經》卷1〈佛國品1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 332, c27)

<sup>508</sup> 「肇曰：欲言其有，有不自生；欲言其無，緣會即形。會形非謂無，非自非謂有。且有有故有無。無有何所無？有無故有有，無無何所有？然則自有則不有，自無則不無。此法王之正說也。」《注維摩詰經》卷1〈佛國品1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 332, c27-p. 333, a2)

<sup>509</sup> The dependent origination (Skr. *pratītyasamutpāda*) constitutes a true antidote against the erroneous views of both eternalism and nihilism. As Silburn well explains: “Par leur simple réunion, les mots qui constituent le *pratītyasamutpāda* vont enseigner la voie médiane: contre l’éternalisme, le term ‘en dépendance’, *pratītya*, met en évidence l’ensemble des conditions qui sont indispensables à l’apparition d’une chose (*dharma*), laquelle surgit en relation, et non pas d’elle-même, ni non plus sans condition [...]. Le term ‘*samutpāda*’, production en relation, fait échec à l’hérésie de l’annihilation et de non action, en montrant que les choses se produisent en dépendance et non au hasard (*adhicca*). (Silburn 1955, p. 248).



complementary to each other that the two categories discussed above cannot stand alone as absolute independent entities.

A similar passage discussing the interdependence of existence and inexistence is found in chapter 4 where the text explains the action of giving from the Mahāyāna perspective: “Charity is the place of enlightenment, because of not seeking after retribution (i.e., reward)” (MR, p. 99)<sup>510</sup>. After explaining that “to give without seeking after retribution is a practice without characteristics”<sup>511</sup>, Sengzhao proceeds arguing that

<b>[Existence]</b>	<b>[Inexistence]</b>
<b>1a</b> When speaking of existence not to forsake inexistence;	<b>1b</b> when speaking of inexistence not to forsake existence.
<b>2c</b> Even though divergent, existence and inexistence do not contravene their root (the Substance, or Ultimate Truth): only the Mahāyāna doctrine [can reach this]!	
<b>3c</b> Why is it so?	
<b>4a</b> Existence is mentioned only in order to clarify that there is no [such thing as] inexistence and not for the sake of discussing it [as a real entity];	<b>4b</b> inexistence is mentioned only in order to clarify that there is no [such thing as] existence] and not for the sake of discussing it [as a real entity].
<b>5c</b> This is why	
<b>6c</b> even though actions are different, their [common] substance is the absence of characteristics. <sup>512</sup>	

In chapter 5 the argument of existence and inexistence is applied to the bodhisattva whose apparently contradictory behavior is described in the sūtra: “Although in the past one [performed] the practices of Māra, in the present one subjugates the host of Māras: this is the practice of bodhisattvas” (MR, p. 113)<sup>513</sup>:

<b>1a</b> [The bodhisattva] cannot be considered existent;	<b>1b</b> he cannot be considered inexistent.
<b>2c</b> Only through the Mahāyāna practice [one can reach this]!	
<b>3c</b> Why is it so?	
<b>4a</b> If one wishes to say that he is existent, then [he will realize that] he’s got no appearance and no name;	<b>4b</b> if one wishes to say that he is inexistent, then [he will realize that] he still practices innumerable virtues.
<b>5a</b> Practicing innumerable virtues, even though [he is though] inexistent, he exists;	<b>5b</b> having no appearance and no name, even though [he is though] existent, he does not exist.
<b>6c</b> Hence,	
<b>7a</b> when saying that he is existent, inexistence shouldn’t be contravened;	<b>7b</b> when saying that he is inexistent, existence shouldn’t be contravened.

<sup>510</sup> 「布施是道場，不望報故。」「布施是道場不望報故。」《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 364, a12)

<sup>511</sup> 「施不望報無相行也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 364, a12-13)

<sup>512</sup> 肇曰。[……] 夫言有不失無，言無不失有；有無異說而不乖其本者，其唯大乘道乎！何則？言有以明非無，不言有也；言無以明非有，不言無也。然則，萬行雖殊，以無相為體。[……] 《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 364, a12-16)

<sup>513</sup> 雖過魔行而現降伏眾魔是菩薩行《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 380, a11)



8c This is why

9c this paragraph now says that [the bodhisattva] is active and then that he is inactive.

10c Even though action and non-action diverge from each other, the [truth] they point to is the same<sup>514</sup>.

Here again we can notice how the emphasis is put on the interdependence of the two forces and their harmonization. Moreover, in the last two quotations above Sengzhao goes even further, as he envisions “the Mahāyāna Way” as the only doctrine that finally allows to find a harmonious synthesis between the opposed conceptions of existence (*you* 有) and inexistence (*wu* 無) on a deeper level, thus bringing to a resolution the controversies internal to the Xuanxue philosophical debate which had lasted no less than two centuries. As some Chinese scholars have suggested, while during the 4<sup>th</sup> century many Chinese exegetes with a very approximate understanding of the Mahāyāna doctrine had relied on Xuanxue theories for making sense of some key Prajñāpāramitā religious statements (in particular those regarding the relation between matter and emptiness) (this is called “to explain Buddhism by means of Xuanxue”, *yi Xuan jie Fo* 以玄解佛), Sengzhao came to articulate a profoundly Buddhist interpretation of the Xuanxue theories marking a peak in the development of that particular philosophical discourse (“to explain Xuanxue by means of Buddhism”, *yi Fo jie Xuan* 以佛解玄)<sup>515</sup>.

### The absence of self

Another fundamental Buddhist conception explained by Sengzhao in his commentary is the absence of self (Skr. *anātman*). In commenting the sentence “this body is without master, like the earth. This body is without self, like fire. This body is without lifespan, like the wind. This body is without person, like water” (MR, p. 83)<sup>516</sup> Kumārajīva says:

什曰：地無常主，強者得之。身亦無主，隨事而變。病至則惱，死至則滅。聚散隨緣，不得自在也。《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 341, b27-29)

K: The earth has no constant master [since] the stronger [among men conquer and] occupy it. In the same way, the body is without master and changes according to the circumstances: when illness comes it is in pain, when death comes it undergoes extinction. Aggregation and dispersion depend on conditions, [so the body] is not independent.

In explaining the same sentence Sengzhao adopts a very different approach: he keeps the fundamental idea of the Four Elements as basic constituents of all things, but further develops it through the use of *pianwen* creating the usual *a/b* parallel argumentative lines leading to a final harmonization:

1c The myriad things and the myriad shapes are made of the Four Elements.

2a Externally they are earth, trees, mountains and rivers;

3a When they gather [things] come to life,

4a Coming to life is internal

2b internally they are the four limbs and the various parts of the body.

3b When they disperse [things] die out.

4b Dying is external

<sup>514</sup> 肇曰：不可得而有，不可得而無者：其唯大乘行乎！何則？欲言其有，無相無名；欲言其無，萬德斯行。萬德斯行，故雖無而有；無相無名，故雖有而無。然則言有不乖無，言無不乖有。是以此章或說有行，或說無行。有無雖殊，其致不異也。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷5〈文殊師利問疾品5〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 380, a11-17)

<sup>515</sup> Cf. Xu Kangsheng 1979, p. 48

<sup>516</sup> 是身無主，為如地；是身無我，為如火；是身無壽，為如風；是身無人，為如水。《維摩詰所說經》卷1〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 539, b21-22)

Sengzhao's comment then goes on rephrasing Kumārajīva's explanation:

So through the four elements [constituting] the internal and external [reality] [the theory of] “non-self” is clarified by the use of analogy. As a traditional saying from the foreign land (i.e. India) goes, “the land is inhabited by the stronger [man] who first [comes occupy it]”; the same happens with the body, which formed through conditions: when those come together it arises, when those disperse it falls apart. How could there be a True lord constantly governing it? [...]<sup>518</sup>

As we can see from the above spacial rendering of Sengzhao's *pianwen* composition, the absence of self-existing entities depends on the fact that they actually derive from the assembly of Four Elements; in verse 2, those entities are described from the **external** and **internal** perspectives; then in verses 3 and 4 the universal process of formation and destruction is described in a Taoist-like terminology<sup>519</sup>. The conclusion to which the two sequences *a* and *b* converge is that no matter whether internal or external, all entities are subjected to formation and destruction, hence they are devoided of a self-existing nature.

The number of dichotomic concepts displayed in the text (internal/external, gather/disperse, coming to life/dying etc.) appear in this case somehow artificial, and it is likely that it is the *pianwen* setup itself that stimulates such elaboration (the great deal of tropoi is indeed a characterizing element of the style). The argumentative sequence displayed is far from being logically rigorous, and the impression is that its force lies in the very form in which the content is articulated; in other words, by fitting the Buddhist idea of no-self into the *pianwen* literary patterns, Sengzhao turns a logical demonstration into a descriptive statement which derives its convincingness from the adherence to a natural dynamics that for the Chinese is absolutely self-evident and undeniable.

### The dharma body

Based upon the information made available by Kumārajīva (cf. Kumārajīva's comments on this topic on pp. 94 - 97), Sengzhao believes that the dharma body is gained by the bodhisattva in the seventh stage of his progression: “once he has obtained the dharma body he enters the realm of non-action (i.e. nirvāṇa). His mind cannot be investigated by knowledge, his shape cannot be reproduced into an image. That is why [the text uses the word] “unmeasurable”. [Instead,] from the sixth stage down the term “measurable” is used”<sup>520</sup>. Moreover, unlike all things in the Three Worlds it is not a precarious aggregation of elements bound to dissolution, in fact “the dharma body is like empty space, it is not constructed by the Four Elements”<sup>521</sup>; its actions are not

<sup>517</sup> 肇曰。夫萬事萬形，皆四大成。在外則為土木山河，在內則為四支百體。聚而為生，散而為死。生則為內，死則為外。內外雖殊，然其（read as 四）大不異。《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 341, b29-c3）

<sup>518</sup> 故以內外四大，類明無我也。如外地古今相傳，強者先宅，故無主也，身亦然耳，眾緣所成：緣合則起，緣散則離。何有真宰常主之者？主、壽、人是一我。義立四名也。《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 341, c3-7）

<sup>519</sup> See for example *Zhuangzi*: “Life is the companion of death; death is the beginning of life. Who understands their workings? Man's life is a coming-together of breath. If it comes together, there is life; if it scatters, there is death. And if life and death are companions to each other, then what is there for us to be anxious about? 生也死之徒，死也生之始，孰知其紀！人之生，氣之聚也；聚則為生，散則為死。若死生為徒，吾又何患！（*Zhuangzi* 莊子，*Zhi beyou* 知北遊）

<sup>520</sup> 「肇曰。既得法身入無為境。心不可以智求。形不可以像取。故曰無量。六住已下名有量也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 330, a18-20）

<sup>521</sup> 「肇曰。法身如空，非四大所起造也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈見阿閼佛品 12〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 410, b16-17）

characterized as intentional acts but rather as spontaneous responses (*ying* 應) to the needs of the suffering beings who need to be guided into the Buddhist path.

The above elements are all integrated into the following long and complex *pianwen* composition explaining the sūtra sentence “the body of the Buddha is a dharma body”<sup>522</sup>:

<b>1c</b> A sūtra says: “the dharma body is a body of empty space”.	
<b>2a</b> It is <u>not born</u> and there is nothing it couldn’t be born from;	<b>2b</b> it is <u>not shaped</u> and it can take any shape.
<b>3a</b> It is <u>beyond</u> the Three Worlds;	<b>3b</b> it <u>transcends</u> the realm of discriminative thought.
<b>4a</b> It is not contained in the five skandhas nor in the six āyatanas;	<b>4b</b> no praise can reach it.
<b>5a</b> <u>Cold and heat</u> cannot afflict it;	<b>5b</b> <u>life and death</u> cannot transform it.
<b>6c</b> Hence,	
<b>7c</b> as a thing,	
<b>8a</b> being subtle and without appearance it <u>cannot be considered existent</u> ;	<b>8b</b> promptly responding to the ten thousand shapes it <u>cannot be considered inexistent</u> .
<b>9a</b> It embraces the eight extremities [of the universe], then it <u>can’t be called small</u> ;	<b>9b</b> it penetrates even where there is no interstice, then it <u>can’t be called large</u> .
<b>10c</b> That is why it can	
<b>11a</b> wander between life and death, thus being able to fathom the infinite transformations;	<b>11b</b> [it can] manifest in many different ways, thus being able to respond to the countless needs [of the beings].
<b>12c</b> This is something that the two vehicles [of the Śrāvakas and Pratyeka-buddhas] cannot discuss upon, and [even] the bodhisattvas only one life away from Enlightenment cannot see.	
<b>13c</b> Let alone the common people who don’t even have eyes; how could they possibly address their mind to it? <sup>523</sup>	

Here the “dharma body” is discussed in great detail and with evident religious enthusiasm applying all the expository devices of the parallel prose style, including an abundance of tropoi. The result is a complex “literary canvas” with a very intricate texture. The passage is divided into three blocks: in the first one (lines 2 to 5) the inherent features of the dharma body are depicted; in the second (lines 8-9) an apophatic characterization of it is presented; in the third its supernatural powers and far-reaching efficacy are extolled. The conclusion to which the *a* and *b* sequences converge is a passionate mystical effusion in which the unfathomable nature of the dharma body is presented as a sort of “religious *zenit*” that very few beings can reach.

## The enlightenment

The enlightenment (Skr. *bodhi*) is another core conception of the Buddhist doctrine which is elaborated upon by Sengzhao in his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*. In Sengzhao’s eyes, even the Buddha itself is nothing but the representation of the “enlightenment”. See the following *pianwen* passage ending up with a paraphrase of a well-known passage from *Laozi*<sup>524</sup> which

<sup>522</sup> 「佛身者，即法身也。」《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 343, a2)

<sup>523</sup> 肇曰。經云。法身者虛空身也。無生而無不生，無形而無不形；超三界之表，絕有心之境；陰入所不攝，稱讚所不及；寒暑不能為其患，生死無以化其體故。其為物也，微妙無象，不可為有；備應萬形，不可為無。彌綸八極，不可為小；細入無間，不可為大。故能出生入死，通洞于無窮之化；變現殊方，應無端之求。此二乘之所不議，補處之所不覩，況凡夫無目，敢措心於其間哉 [...] 《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 343, a2-11)

<sup>524</sup> Namely, “There is a thing that completes out of the diffuse. It is born before Heaven and Earth. Vacant it is, alas, still. It stands alone and does not change. It travels all around but is not in danger. One might take it for the mother

again reveals that Sengzhao conceives the Buddhist awakening as a Taoist-like realization of the Tao (the Way, or cosmic order):

As to the ‘Buddha’, [this term] designates the great awakening [in which] the principle [of emptiness] is fathomed and the nature [of the dharmas] is fully understood.

**1c.** Its Path is void and mysterious, so it marvelously transcends the ordinary sphere.

**2a.** His mind (i.e. the mind of the Buddha) cannot be known through wisdom,

**2b.** his body cannot be observed through an image.

**3a.** He conforms to the motion of the myriad things and yet dwells in the sphere of no-motion;

**3b.** he resides within the principles [of the doctrine transmitted through] words and yet remains in the realm of no-words.

**4a.** He is not existent and cannot be defined ‘inexistent’;

**4b.** he is not inexistent, and cannot be defined existent.

**5c** Quiet and empty [as it is], nobody can measure it. I do not know how to call it, so if I were forced to [designate it with a name] I would call it ‘enlightenment’. Being the ultimate, I also consider it as being the utmost.<sup>525</sup>

Elsewhere Sengzhao elaborates again on this topic and constructs a long argumentation which constitutes one of the monk’s most elaborate pieces of *pianwen* exposition:

**1c** The bodhi is the Complete Perfect Awakening and the True wisdom without characteristics!

**2a** Its Way is empty and mysterious,

**2b** it marvelously transcends [the sphere of conventional knowledge]

**3a** If you **listen** to it there is no way to fully hold it with your hearing;

**3a’** If you try to **know** it, there is no way to apply your intelligence;

**3b** If you try to **discuss** it, there is no way to arrange your words;

**3b’** If you try to **reproduce its image**, there is no way to portrait its appearance.

**4c** So,

**5c** being the Way,

**6a** It is subtle and without appearance, then it can’t be called existent;

**6b** [but] when applied, its power is inexhaustible, then it can neither be called inexistent.

**7c** That is why [the bodhisattva who attains it] can

**8a** mysteriously reflect the myriad things without shining;

**8a’** ride along the mysterious track without obliterating [the myriad shapes of the existing things];

**8b** embrace heaven and earth without relying [on anything];

**8b’** help in many different ways the deluded beings without any selfishness.

**9c** Up to the point when he will be able to

of Heaven and Earth. I do not know its name. I give it the style ‘Way’. [Only] if forced to make up a name for it, I would say ‘[it is] great’ 有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改。周行而不殆，可以為天地母。吾不知其名，強字之曰‘道’，強為之名曰‘大’ (Laozi 25, transl. from Wagner 2003 (a), pp. 199-200)

<sup>525</sup> [肇]曰。佛者何也，蓋窮理盡性，大覺之稱也。其道虛玄固以妙絕常境。心不可以智知，形不以像測；同萬物之為，而居不為之域。處言數之內，而止無言之鄉。非有而不可為無，非無而不可為有。寂寞虛曠，物莫能測。不知所以名，故強謂之覺；其為至也，亦以極矣。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈見阿閼佛品 12〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 410, a3-10)

<b>10a</b> reach all places;	<b>10a'</b> understand the inner principles of things and [accordingly] accomplish his deeds;	<b>10b</b> scrutinize the mysterious principles of the doctrine;	<b>10b'</b> be carefree and without worries.
<b>11c</b> Being so,			
<b>12a</b> he does not actively know, and yet there is nothing he does not know;	<b>12b</b> he does not act, and yet there is nothing which he does not accomplish.		
<b>13c</b> Only the Way of the <i>bodhi</i> (which is the Great Awakening) [can lead to this]! <sup>526</sup>			

We find here all the formal elements of the parallel prose style at work. In lines 3, 8 and 10, the usual *a* and *b* lines expand into further parallelism forking respectively into *a-a'* and *b-b'*.

The development of the argumentation reproduces the same pattern analyzed in the above quote regarding the dharma body, viz. the inherent features of the *bodhi* are first depicted; then a four-fold apophatic characterization of the bodhisattva who has reached it<sup>527</sup> is formulated; and finally his amazing supernatural powers and merciful salvific skills are praised in ecstatic terms resorting to a great deal of Taoist terminology taken from *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* and *Yijing* (such approach is certainly facilitated by the correspondence posited in the text between the *bodhi* and the Way - *Tao* 道<sup>528</sup> - indeed an early translation of “*bodhi*”, but here impregnated with Taoist meanings).

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As I have anticipated above, the analysis of Sengzhao's *pianwen* philosophical elaborations reveals that his approach to many fundamental Buddhist categories greatly differs from the Indian tradition represented by his foreign master. The Chinese exegete's style of argumentation drives away from Nāgārjuna's logical approach which has been described by Ruegg as follows:

in Mahāyāna, and in Vajrayāna in particular, the processing of language consisting in what may be called semantic neutralization ('desemanticization') continues and complements analytical philosophical deconstruction, that is, the kind of reasoning applied in Mahāyāna whereby conceptual constructs (*kalpanā*, *vikalpa*) and correspondingly posited hypostatized

<sup>526</sup> 「肇曰。[...] 菩提者，蓋是正覺無相之真智乎！其道虛玄，妙絕常境，聽者無以容其聽，智者無以運其智，辯者無以措其言，像者無以狀其儀。故其為道也，微妙無相，不可為有；用之彌懃，不可為無。故能幽鑑萬物而不曜，玄軌超駕而弗夷，大包天地而罔寄，曲濟群惑而無私。至能導達殊方，開物成務，玄機必察，無思無慮。然則無知而無不知，無為而無不為者。其唯菩提大覺之道乎！[...] 《注維摩詰經》卷 4 〈菩薩品 4〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 362, c1-12)

<sup>527</sup> The failure of all attempts to define *bodhi* exposed in this line closely recalls Wang Bi's four-fold apophatic description of the Tao which is found in his *Laozi Zhilue* 老子旨略: “[Even when] ‘listening for it’, one is [still] unable to ‘hear it’. [Even when] ‘looking for it’, one is [still] unable to perceive it. [Even when] groping for it, one is [still] unable to identify it. [Even when] going after its taste one is [still] unable to get its flavor. That is why [the *Laozi* says about the Dao] ‘as a thing’ it ‘completes out of the diffuse’, as an ‘image’ it is ‘without form’; as a “sound” it ‘has an inaudible tone’, as a ‘taste’, it is without flavor” 聽之不可得而聞，視之不可得而彰，體之不可得而知，味之不可得而嘗。故其為物也則混成，為象也則無形，為音也則希聲，為味也則無呈 (*Laozi Zhilue*, transl. from Wagner 2003 (a), p. 83)

<sup>528</sup> Cf. also Sengzhao's comment in chapt. 1 “*bodhi* is a name for the Buddha's Way” 「肇曰。[...] 菩提，佛道名也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1 〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 328, b20-21).

Seen Sengzhao's constant and almost ubiquitous use of Taoist words and expressions, Kuiji's critique that “Sengzhao's [real] intention is actually to establish an identity between the Way of *Laozi* and the Way of the Buddha” 「肇公意，欲以老子之道同佛之道」《說無垢稱經疏》卷 1 〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1782, p. 1002, b28-29) is not without reasons.



entities (*bhāva*) are nullified or emptied ('zeroed'), in particular through *prasaṅga*-type reasoning and philosophical analysis using the *catuskoṭi* or tetralemma.<sup>529</sup>

Rather than focusing on conceptual constructions, analyzing and dismantling them through a logical *reductio ad absurdum*, Sengzhao focuses instead on the dynamic *harmonia oppositorum* pervading and animating the entire universe: like male and female, day and night *etc.* all elements of existence are connected to each-other in a relation of mutual correspondence and inter-dependence; since they can only operate together, none of them can be considered as a separate, self existing element. Evidently, in this kind of approach the conceptions elaborated upon by Sengzhao are treated as dynamic, operative forces and not as "static" logical items or artificial mental constructions.

The cultural divide between India and China - and in particular the linguistic one - here again plays a key role. Language determines to a great extent the way a civilization thinks and articulates its thoughts about reality; it represents the horizon within which things appear to men and acquire certain meanings. The concreteness and the very low level of abstraction allowed by the Chinese pictographic writing system makes the "hypostatization" of entities in form of mental constructs - a phenomenon that naturally occurs in the Indo-european civilizations when language becomes a tool for undertaking the philosophical quest - almost impossible. In fact, the Chinese language works on a symbolic and normative level rather than on a definitory (or "scientific") one: words and expressions are not expected to fix a concept by isolating it from the others and thus dispell ambiguity; rather, they have to evoke a cluster of images which function as emblems orienting action<sup>530</sup>. This symbolic power of words and expressions derives precisely from their not being fully defined (we are speaking here from a Western, "scientific" perspective); in fact, their "hazy contours" allow them to preserve and transfer the magmatic force of ancestral symbols without bridling it. The "margin of indeterminacy" which is left around them allows movement; it is an empty space into which their force can expand and create an influence. It is for this reason that the undetermined (i.e. the darkness, the mystery) is not dispelled by the Chinese, but instead accepted as a constitutive part of reality; not only so, it even represents an essential component of their world-view and psychology, and occupies a core place in all kinds of traditional arts.<sup>531</sup>

These general constitutive features of the Chinese language are naturally reflected in the articulation of the Chinese philosophical discourse where, for example, fundamental conceptions like the Tao, the Yin-Yang forces, the Five Elements *etc.* cannot be understood and explained as abstract terms or conceptualized metaphysical notions; they constitute instead pulsating emblems preserving a dynamic, rithmic power and a normative efficacy. The aim of the Chinese philosophical inquiry is not to investigate an abstract truth or to describe the essence of things, but rather to identify the dynamics of the natural forces governing the universe and transfrom

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<sup>529</sup> Ruegg 2016, p. 240

<sup>530</sup> Cf. Granet's remarkably acute observations on these fundamental features of the Chinese language: "le langage vise, avant tout, à agir. Il prétend moins à informer clairement qu'à diriger la conduite.[...] Le mot, en chinois, est bien autre chose qu'un signe servant à noter un concept. Il ne correspond pas à une notion dont on tient à fixer, de façon aussi définie que possible, le degré d'abstraction et de généralité. Il évoque, en faisant d'abord apparaître la plus active d'entre elles, un complexe indéfini d'images particulières.[...] Le mot, de même qu'il ne correspond pas à un concept, n'est pas non plus un simple signe. Ce n'est pas un signe abstrait auquel on ne donne vie qu'à l'aide d'artifices grammaticaux ou syntactiques. Dans sa forme immuable de monosyllabe, dans son aspect neutre, il retient toute l'énergie impérative de l'acte dont il est le correspondant vocal, dont il est l'emblème" (Granet 1934, pp. 24 - 25) "[...]L'écriture figurative a aidé la plupart des mots à garder, avec une sorte de fraîcheur et le caractère de mots vivants, un entier pouvoir d'expression concrète. Conservée, sinon choisie, en vertu d'une disposition de l'esprit chinois qui semble profonde, elle a empêché le vocabulaire de former un matériel abstrait. Elle paraît convenir à une pensée qui ne se propose point d'économiser les opérations mentales" (*Ibidem*, p. 34).

<sup>531</sup> See for example the Chinese traditional landscape painting, where the empty space occupies a large part of the whole composition surrounding the material figures and balancing their weight with its impalpable inconsistency. See on this the profound and inspiring study by François Cheng (Cheng 2000)

them into normative models on which basis to regulate the family and state (social level) and one's own mind-body (self-cultivation).

On a symbolic level, the divide between the Indo-european and the Chinese philosophical discourse could hardly be greater: the first came to see knowledge and truth (both in the secular and religious *milieu*) as a “light” disclosing true reality, whereas the Chinese always associated the zenith of their philosophical inquiry with the Dark and the Mysterious<sup>532</sup>. When the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature was transmitted to China, the light of *prajñā* dispelling ignorance met with (or - we might say - clashed against) the ideal of darkness and mysteriousness. Sengzhao's craft and genius consist in the creation of a new philosophical formula based on specific literary patterns and techniques reinterpreting some key Mahāyāna conceptions in a deeply Chinese manner without “distorting” their original significance. Such synthesis of two radically different world-views and epistemological approaches constitutes a daring, yet successful, operation of cross-cultural reception in which the original message is betrayed, but just in order to be reformulated on the basis of a different mindset and aesthetic criteria and be finally transmitted to a new public. To simply compare Nāgārjuna and Sengzhao's Buddhist thought as it is presented in their writings without considering the cultural divide between the two would inevitably lead to miss the crucial point we have discussed here, which was previously evidenced by Zürcher in very few lines:

Nāgārjuna's almost mathematical precision fades away into the utter obscurity of Sengzhao's mystical effusions. In other words, “darkness” is a most essential element in Dark Learning (Xuanxue), and any attempt to dispel it by the light of reason, however indispensable to a western public, will take the very heart out of it. But perhaps the problem is insoluble [...]<sup>533</sup>

### 2.2.3 Shaping a “spiritual model”: the Perfect Man (*zhiren* 至人)

Another important element linking Sengzhao to the Xuanxue tradition and more in general to the Chinese traditional idea of “wisdom” is the creation of a spiritual model who embodies the practice of all the virtues and skills describes in the sūtra in abstract philosophical terms. In fact, for the Chinese wisdom cannot be an abstract ideal but has to be translated into a concrete Way, i.e. a concrete practice of self cultivation and a way of living in the world.

We know from Sengzhao's biography that in his early youth he found texts like the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* insufficient in providing a Way for the “cultivation of the spirit” (*qishen* 棲神), but then upon listening to the recitation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* he felt that he “had found something he could rely on” (*zhi suogui* 知所歸) and became a monk. Evidently he had found in this sūtra that practical way of cultivation which he was searching for.

In his commentary to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Sengzhao shapes a “spiritual model” or “exemplary figure”, which he calls *zhiren* 至人, the “Perfect Man” (or “Ultimate man”)<sup>534</sup>. This term is derived from the *Zhuangzi* whose first chapter (the famous *Xiaoyaoyou* 逍遙遊) reads: “the Perfect Man has no self, the Holy Man has no merits, the Saint has no name”<sup>535</sup>, and apparently first appeared in the Buddhist writings with Zhi Dun 支遁 (314 - 366) who evokes such figure no less than four times in his *Preface to a Selection of Compared Passages of the Larger and Lesser Prajñāpāramitā* 大小品對比要抄序 preserved in the *Chu sanzang jiji* ([T2145], p. 55, a13-p. 56, c15). In this utterly obscure text filled with Buddho-Xuanxue terminology in which philosophical speculations merge with mystical effusions the Ultimate man

<sup>532</sup> Here I refer in particular to the Taoist tradition which is at the basis of Chinese cosmology and aesthetics. As it is known, Confucius preferred not to explicitly address the topic of supernatural forces and focused instead on the problem of how to harmonize human relations and create a social order.

<sup>533</sup> Zürcher 2013, p. 674

<sup>534</sup> In other of his writings Sengzhao uses alternatively the two terms “Perfect Man” (*zhiren* 至人) and “Sage” (*shengren* 聖人). The two words are substantially equivalent.

<sup>535</sup> “至人無己，神人無功，聖人無名”



is a sort of Buddhist hero who penetrates the cosmic truth, understands all the subtleties of the scriptures and is able to teach and lead the beings towards enlightenment. See as an example the following passages in Hurvitz's English translation<sup>536</sup>:

「夫至人也，攬通群妙，凝神玄冥。虛靈響應，感通無方。建同德以接化。設玄教以悟神[...]。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 55)

Now the Ultimate Man is one whose vision penetrates the varied subtleties; who solidifies his intelligent spirit in the form of the mysterious; whose numina, resounding like echoes, respond without limit. Establishing an undifferentiating faculty, he uses it to convert; setting up a mystical doctrine, he uses it to enlighten intelligent spirit [...]

「是以至人順群情以徵理。取驗乎沸油。明小品之體本。塞群疑幽滯因物之徵驗。故示驗以應之。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 55, c13-15)

For this reason the Ultimate Man conciliates the feelings of the varied multitudes by giving concrete proof of universal truth, drawing evidence from boiling oil (note 24: This sentence is particularly difficult. It seems to mean that the Sage convinces the masses by proving the truth of the general, abstract principles he professes, his proofs being as vivid and as concrete as boiling oil.). He clarifies the fundamental essence of the Lesser Prajñāpāramitā, nullifying the subtle obstructions of manifold doubts and relying on the concrete proofs found in various things. Therefore he demonstrates this Scripture's efficacy and thus makes response to it.

「是以至人於物遂通而已。明乎小大之不異。暢玄標之有寄。[...]」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 55, c25-28)

Therefore the Ultimate Man's relation with things is such that he effects communication with them, but that is all. He clarifies the lack of difference between the Lesser and the Greater, his proposition is that the mysterious and the manifest have terms to which they can be assigned [...]

But how does Sengzhao re-elaborate this figure? Who does exactly the Perfect Man represent in his writings? In Sengzhao's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* we find nine passages in which this model is described<sup>537</sup>. Relying on such material we can provide the following portrait: “the Perfect Man mingles with the Truth and embodies nirvāṇa. He empties his heart. Even though all dharmas are enlightened [by his wisdom] his mind always remains inactive; even though he goes through suffering and joy he does not “receive” the sensations (Skr. *vedanā*) [deriving from them]. The external things and the self are [both] forever obliterated”<sup>538</sup>; being endowed with a dharma body, “he is hollow and without appearance; he acquires a shape only because he responds to the beings, [but] such [ever changing] shape has no constant substance”<sup>539</sup>; in helping the beings “he adopts ever changing strategies and is able to hide or manifest [different worlds] at will”<sup>540</sup>.

As to the exact identity of the Perfect Man, in the *Commentary* this epithet is alternatively attributed to the Buddha (passages 1, 4 and 8), to Vimalakīrti (passage 3), or to both at the same time (passages 5 and 9). In one quote the term is referred to Mañjuśrī (passage 8) and in another

<sup>536</sup> Cf. Hurvitz 1968

<sup>537</sup> 1. T1775, p. 333, a26-b1; 2. p. 334, b15-21; 3. p. 339, b22-23; 4. p. 344, a10-11; 5. p. 359, a21-23; 6. p. 365, a13-18; 7. p. 370, c22-23; 8. p. 393, a1-2; 9. p. 403, a10-12

<sup>538</sup> 肇曰。[...] 至人冥真體寂，空虛其懷。雖復萬法並照而心未嘗有。苦樂是逕而不為受。物我永寂。[...]」《注維摩詰經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 333, a25-b1)

<sup>539</sup> 肇曰。夫至人空洞無象，應物故形，形無常體。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 334, b15-16)

<sup>540</sup> 肇曰。[...] 至人變謀無方，隱顯殊迹。故迭為脩短，應物之情耳。[...]」《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 370, c20-23)

one generically to the bodhisattva (passage 2). The following quote is the most important for correctly understanding this figure:

「一念知一切法是道場，成一切智故。

肇曰。一切智者智之極也。朗若晨曦，眾冥俱照。澄若靜淵，群象竝鑒。無知而無所不知者，其唯一切智乎！何則？夫有心則有封，有封則有疆。封疆既形，則其智有涯。其智有涯，則所照不普。至人無心，無心則無封，無封則無疆。封疆既無，則其智無涯。其智無涯，則所照無際。故能以一念一時畢知一切法也。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 365, a6-21)

**To understand all the dharmas in a single moment of thought is the place of enlightenment, because of the accomplishment of omniscience (MR, p.100).**

**SZ:** “Omniscience” is the utmost of wisdom. Bright like the morning sun, it illuminates all obscurities; calm like a silent abyss, it enlightens all phenomena. When there is no active knowing and yet there is nothing which is not known, that is omniscience! What do I mean? The discriminative thought creates barriers and barriers create boundaries. When barriers and boundaries are created, wisdom is limited, and the shining of a limited wisdom is not all-pervading. The Perfect Man has no discriminative thought, hence no barriers are created, and without barriers there are also no boundaries. Without barriers and boundaries, wisdom is not limited and its shining is all-pervading. This is why he can know all dharmas in a single moment.

Here the Perfect Man is described in relation to the attainment of sudden enlightenment which makes wisdom unhindered and thus leads to omniscience. Sengzhao believes that this state of omniscience is reached by the bodhisattva in the Seventh Stage (*qi zhu* 七住) of his progression<sup>541</sup>. In fact, in his *Commentary* he clearly says that “from the seventh stage on, the knowledge of the mind is extinguished; being the mind inactive, there is no virtue which is not practiced”<sup>542</sup>; “in the seventh stage [the bodhisattva realizes] the non-arising [of the dharmas] and his faith is unmovable”<sup>543</sup>; “‘Emancipation’ is [a state in which] the mind is free. Once this emancipation is attained, all the actions, the inner activities as well as the outer responses, are free and unhindered. This cannot even be discussed by the two Vehicles [of the Śrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas]. Only in the seventh stage [of his career the bodhisattva obtains] a dharma body and reaches this [Inconceivable] Emancipation (i.e. enlightenment)”<sup>544</sup>. Instead, referring to those who are still in the preceding stages Sengzhao says that “from the sixth stage down the mind is not yet pure and unified. When they deal with the existent they forsake Emptiness, when they deal with Emptiness they forsake the existent. They are not able to deal with both with equanimous pure mind”<sup>545</sup>.

<sup>541</sup> The bodhisattva career goes through a progression of ten stages (Skr. *bhūmi*), *shi zhu* 十住. The Chinese Buddhist *literati* of the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries had known about these stages from the following texts: *Jianbei yiqie zhide jing* 漸備一切智德經 (translated by Dharmarakṣa) and *Shizhu jing* 十住經, *Dazhidulun* 大智度論 (發趣品), *Shizhu piposha* 十住毗婆沙 (all translated by Kumārajīva).

<sup>542</sup> 「七住已上心智寂滅。以心無為故無德不為。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 329, b12-13)

<sup>543</sup> 「七住已上無生，信不可壞也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 329, c26-27)

<sup>544</sup> 「肇曰。[...] 解脫者，自在心法也。得此解脫，則凡所作為，內行外應，自在無閼。此非二乘所能議也。七住法身已上乃得此解脫也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 6〈不思議品 6〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 382, b13-16)

<sup>545</sup> 肇曰。六住以下心未純一。在有則捨空。在空則捨有。未能以平等真心，有無俱涉」《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈5 文殊師利問疾品〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 378, c24-p. 379, a8)

In the light of the above observations it becomes clear that Sengzhao's Perfect Man describes a bodhisattva at the seventh stage of his progression or above it, and this is the reason why the epithet can be referred to the Buddha, as well as to Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī<sup>546</sup>.

It is noteworthy that the conception that the bodhisattva experiences sudden enlightenment at the seventh stage of his career was first clearly formulated by the monk Zhi Dun<sup>547</sup>, whose description of the "Ultimate man" has been related above. Relying on a passage by Liu Qiu 劉虬 (Southern Qi dynasty, 479 - 502) preserved in the *Chu sanzang jiji*<sup>548</sup> Tang Yongtong suggests that the expression "the Ultimate Man is one whose vision penetrates the varied subtleties" 夫至人也，攬通群妙 which is found in Zhi Dun's *Preface* symbolizes the attainment of the "forbearance of the non-arising" (*wusheng ren* 無生忍) associated with the Seventh stage, and "to respond without limit" (*gan-tong wu fang* 感通無方) represents the achievement of the tenth stage<sup>549</sup>. If this is true, then we can state that Sengzhao's elaboration of the figure of the Perfect Man and the significance attributed to it are directly derived from Zhi Dun.

## 2.2.4 Paraphrasing Kumārajīva's comments

Besides the core part of Sengzhao's exegesis consisting in personal re-elaborations of many important Mahāyāna conceptions in an original Xuanxue argumentative style, many entries of the monk's *Commentary* are essentially a rephrasing of Kumārajīva's explanation; in some cases some short (albeit telling) remarks are added; in others, the content is reproduced with a slightly different wording but without variations.

Let us consider the following passage and compare Kumārajīva and Sengzhao's commentaries:

富蘭那迦葉 (什曰。迦葉，母姓也。富蘭那，字也。其人起邪見，謂一切法無所有，如虛空不生滅也。肇曰。姓迦葉，字富蘭那。其人起邪見，謂一切法斷滅性空，無君臣父子忠孝之道也) 《注維摩詰經》卷 3 〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 350, c16-20)

**Pūraṇa Kāśyapa** (MR, p. 89)

**K:** *Kāśyapa* is his mother's name; *Pūraṇa* is his name. He elaborated the heretical theory holding that all the dharmas are absolutely non-existing. They are like empty space: they do not arise nor perish.

**SZ:** His surname is *Kāśyapa*, his name is *Pūraṇa*. He elaborated the heretical theory holding that all dharmas are not derived from causes and their nature is empty; [he holds that] there is no relation between king and subjects, father and son, [so] there is no practice of Loyalty (*zhong* 忠) and Filial Piety (*xiao* 孝).

*Pūraṇa Kāśyapa* was an Indian non-Buddhist master contemporaneous with the Buddha. He is known for having rejected the law of *karma* (Skr. *hetupratyaya*; i.e. the doctrine that everything derives from causes and conditions), a position which led to an amorality denying the existence of any reward for good actions or punishment for the evil ones. Sengzhao here paraphrases Kumārajīva's comment, but at the same time adds a short but interesting statement in which he

<sup>546</sup> Prof. Tu Yanqiu also gets to this conclusion. See Tu Yanqiu 2011 (a) in which the author describes the Buddhist path of self-cultivation as it emerges from Sengzhao's *Commentary*.

<sup>547</sup> This was to be retrospectively called "minor sudden enlightenment" (*xiao dunwu* 小頓悟) in order to distinguish it from the "major sudden enlightenment" (*da dunwu* 大頓悟) (i.e. the full emancipation obtained at the tenth stage) first elaborated by Daosheng 道生.

<sup>548</sup> T2145, p. 68, b29-c2

<sup>549</sup> Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 487 (Tang's comments are reported in brackets): 「支公之論“無生”以七住為道陰陰足（支公《大小品序》所謂之“攬通群妙”），十住則“群方與能”（支序所謂“感通無方”）在迹斯異語照則一（七住之與八九十住，其跡雖異，而其般若之照則前後無不同）」《出三藏記集》卷 9 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 68, b29-c2, *Preface to the Amitārtha-sūtra* 無量義經序)

evidences these moral implications of Kāśyapa's theory and condemns the destructive effects it could have on a society strongly based on moral relations like the Chinese one.

Let us examine other two passages in which Sengzhao's paraphrases Kumārajīva's comments:

末伽梨拘睺梨子 (什曰。末伽梨字也，拘睺梨是其母也。其人起見云：眾生罪垢無因無緣也。肇曰。末伽梨字也，拘睺梨其母名也。其人起見謂，眾生苦樂不因行得。自然耳也) 《注維摩詰經》卷 3 〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 350, c21-25)

**Maskarin Gośālīputra** (MR, p. 89)

**K:** *Maskarin* is his name; *Gośālī* is his mother[‘s name]. He elaborated the heretic theory holding that the moral defilement of the beings has no cause and no condition.

**SZ:** *Maskarin* is his name; *Gośālī* is his mother[‘s name]. He elaborated the heretic theory saying that the suffering or happiness of the beings are not obtained as the result of their actions. It is just a spontaneous [event].

刪闍夜毘羅胝子 (什曰。刪闍夜，字也。毘羅胝，母名也。其人起見謂：要久逕生死，彌歷劫數，然後自盡苦際也。肇曰。[\*]刪闍夜，字也。毘羅胝，其母名也。其人謂：道不須求，逕生死劫數，苦盡自得。如轉縷丸於高山，縷盡自止，何假求耶) 《注維摩詰經》卷 3 〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 350, c26-p. 351, a2)

**Samjayin Vairāṭīputra** (MR, p. 89)

**K:** *Samjayin* is his name, *Vairāṭī* is his mother's name. This man elaborated the theory saying that one has to be reborn again and again, and go through many eons before eventually spontaneously finding extinction and entering nirvāṇa.

**SZ:** *Samjayin* is his name, *Vairāṭī* is his mother's name. He said that one does not need to pursue enlightenment [since] after being reborn for many eons his suffering will [spontaneously] come to an end and he will become carefree (i.e. he will enter nirvāṇa). [His existence is exactly] like a ball of yarn rolling down a high mountain: when the yarn has completely unrolled it will spontaneously stop. Why should [then one] pursue [extinction]?

In the two quotes above the correspondence between the two commentaries is almost complete: Sengzhao faithfully reports Kumārajīva's explanations, and at the same time includes some few more details that evidently were supplied by the master in his oral exegesis but were left out of his commentary. This phenomenon is quite common throughout the *Commentary*, and much of the extra information related by Sengzhao on the Indian world or Sanskrit terminology has been used in this work when discussing Kumārajīva's *Commentary*.

Sometimes Sengzhao's explanation must have been just a *verbatim* repetition of the master's words. In these cases the editors of T1775 decided to avoid re-writing those lines and added instead notes like "[Sengzhao's] explanation reads the same as the above one" 釋同上, "Sengzhao's comment is the same as the above one" 肇注同上 or "Sengzhao's comment reads the same" 肇注同.

### 2.2.5 Divergent explanations and original interpretations

The third component of Sengzhao's exegesis is constituted on the one side by comments which, albeit focusing on the same issues discussed by Kumārajīva, are somehow divergent from them; as to these cases, we might suppose that Sengzhao had retained the key points and the rough content of Kumārajīva's oral exegesis but then, having forgotten the details, he had to make it up on his own. On the other side, we have comments which are markedly different from Kumārajīva's ones and even alternative to them; in these cases Sengzhao resorts to a whole *repertoire* of *topoi* mainly borrowed from the Taoist Classics and freely adapts them to the needs of his exegesis. Let us examine some examples from both subcategories.



1. Sengzhao's following comment slightly diverges from Kumārajīva's one in a curious way:

心大如海。

**什**曰。海有三德：一曰深廣無邊；二曰清淨，不受雜穢；三曰藏積無量珍寶。菩薩三德義同海也。**肇**曰。海有五德：一，澄淨不受死屍；二，多出妙寶；三，大龍注雨，滴如車軸，受而不溢；四，風日不能竭；五，淵深難測。大士心淨不受毀戒之屍，出慧明之寶，佛大法雨受而不溢，魔邪風日不能虧損，其智淵深莫能測者。故曰“心大如海”。」《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 339, b8-16)

**His (=Vimalakīrti's) mind was great as the ocean** (MR, p. 81).

**K:** The ocean has three virtues: 1. It is deep and vast, without borders; 2. It is crystalline and clean, not contaminated by impurities; 3. It hosts immeasurable treasures. The three virtues of the bodhisattva [Vimalakīrti] are comparable to those of the ocean.

**SZ:** The ocean has five virtues: 1. It is clean and clear, not contaminated by dead corpses<sup>550</sup>; 2. Many wonderful treasures are found in it; 3. When the great nāgas pour down rain with drops as thick as an axle<sup>551</sup>, it receives it without overflowing; 4. the winds and the sun cannot dry it up; 5. It is profound and hard to fathom.

The Great Man (Skt. *mahāsattva*, lit. “Great Being”)<sup>552</sup> [Vimalakīrti] 1. has a pure mind which is not contaminated by any violation of the rules; 2. many treasures of wisdom are found in him; 3. he fully receives the rain of the Great Dharma dropped by the Buddha without letting it overflow; 4. the wind of evil and the sun of perversion cannot undermine him; 5. his wisdom is deep and nobody can fathom it. That is why the text says that “his mind was great as the ocean”.

The idea of comparing the “virtues of the ocean” to the qualities of the bodhisattva is common to both commentators, however it is developed in two different ways. It might well be that while assisting to the oral explanation of the Kuchean master, Sengzhao had retained the idea of this correspondence and later on when re-elaborating his notes into a proper commentary he had reformulated it in his own way.

In both cases the description of the “virtues of the ocean” seems to have been inspired by a scripture called *The sūtra of the Eight Virtues of the Ocean Expounded by the Buddha* 佛說海八德經 [T35]; even though the translation of this text is attributed to Kumārajīva, it is more likely that it was actually produced by Zhu Falan 竺法蘭 (Dharmaratna) during the Eastern Han period (25 - 220 CE)<sup>553</sup>.

<sup>550</sup> A dead corpse (*sishi* 死屍) is something impure, hence in the Buddhist tradition it is also used as a metaphor for the impurity deriving from the violation of monastic rules, or to represent the “wicked monk” who violated the rules *tout court*.

<sup>551</sup> The expression “raindrops as thick as an axle” (*di ru chezhou* 滴如車軸) is clearly derived from the Indian literature. In the translated Buddhist sūtras the “axle” is commonly used as a metaphor describing the largeness or thickness of something, see as an example the following quotes: 「其雲下大沸灰雨，其滂大如車軸。」《大樓炭經》卷5〈12災變品〉(CBETA, T1, no. 23, p. 304, c12-13); 「注大洪雨，其雨滂瀾猶如車軸、或有如杵。」《起世因本經》卷9〈11住世品〉(CBETA, T1, no. 25, p. 410, c22-23); 「奔茶利迦華，其華雜色，青黃赤白，大如車輪。下有藕根，瀾如車軸。」《起世經》卷1〈1閻浮洲品〉(CBETA, T1, no. 24, p. 312, c26-27); 「淚如車軸」《祖庭事苑》卷5 (CBETA, X64, no. 1261, p. 386, b8 // Z 2:18, p. 74, a5 // R113, p. 147, a5).

There are also a few occurrences in which the image of the “axle”, albeit still describing a heavy rainfall, is used in a different way, *i.e.* the uninterrupted spinning of the axle represents the persistence of the rain falling down, *e.g.* 「又復於彼大海中，注雨不斷如車軸」《大方廣佛華嚴經》卷15〈12賢首品〉(CBETA, T10, no. 279, p. 80, a21)

<sup>552</sup> “Great being” (*dashi* 大士, Skt. *mahāsattva*) indicates an “advanced” bodhisattva who has already reached a very high level on the path to enlightenment. This term is often used as an epithet of the *bodhisattva*, cf. the common expression *pusa dashi* 菩薩大士 or *pusa mohesa* 菩薩摩訶薩 (Skt. *bodhisattva mahāsattva*). On the meaning of *dashi* 大士 in Buddhist and pre-Buddhist literature see Seidel 1983.

<sup>553</sup> Cf. the annotation contained in the sūtra itself added by later editors 「按：此經文，決非羅什之譯。似是後漢之經。疑此是彼竺法蘭為。失本者，藏中錯為羅什譯耳。」《海八德經》卷1 (CBETA, T1, no. 35, p. 819, c13-15)

2. In commenting another passage of the sūtra text, both Sengzhao and Kumārajīva decide to provide some elucidations on the same term, viz. “the truth” (*di* 諦). However, in this case Sengzhao’s interpretation is significantly divergent from the master’s one: while the latter understands it as “the One Truth” of Mahāyāna, the former explains it as “the Four [Noble] Truths” of the Hīnayāna, an interpretation that is manifestly discarded in Kumārajīva’s comment:

「諦是道場，不誑世間故。」

什曰。小乘中說四諦。大乘中說一諦。今言諦是則一諦。一諦實相也。[...]肇曰。四諦，真實、無虛誑也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 4 〈4 菩薩品〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 364, c7–15)

**The truth is the place of enlightenment, because of not misleading the world** (MR, p.100).

**K:** In the Hīnayāna there are Four [Noble] Truths, whereas in Mahāyāna there is One Truth. The “truth” which is mentioned here is the One Truth, and the One Truth is the True Characteristic [of reality].

**SZ:** [“truth” indicates] the Four Truths, which represent authenticity and absence of deception.

Probably, in this case Sengzhao had retained from the translator’s oral exegesis the possibility of a double interpretation of the term, but he forgot which was the right one. So when rearranging his notes he simply tried to guess it.

3. In chapt. 3 we find another passage in which Kumārajīva and Sengzhao focus on the explanation of the same issue, i.e. the difference between “causes” (*yin* 因) and “conditions” (*yuan* 緣). However, Sengzhao’s interpretation is again different from the master’s one:

法不屬因，不在緣故。

什曰。力強為因，力溺 (read with variant 弱) 為緣。肇曰。前後相生，因也。現相助成，緣也。諸法要因緣相假，然後成立。若觀法不在緣，則法不屬因也。《注維摩詰經》卷 2 〈3 弟子品〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 346, b27–c6)

**The Dharma does not belong to causes, because it is not located in conditions.**

**K:** [The difference between causes and conditions is that] causes have a stronger influence, while conditions have milder effects.

**SZ:** What produces a subsequent effect is a cause; what concurs in creating a visible shape is a condition. All dharmas are established only by relying on causes and conditions. If one realizes that the dharmas are not located in the conditions, then [he will discover that] they neither belong to causes.

According to Kumārajīva the difference between “causes” and “conditions” lies in the different intensity of their power; instead, for Sengzhao they differ in that “causes” produce one another working diachronically, while “conditions” work synchronically and simultaneously.

Besides these divergent interpretations, in Sengzhao’s *Commentary* we also find some **original elaborations** in which metaphors, ideas and literary *topoi* belonging to the Chinese literary tradition (but in particular to philosophical Taoism) are adapted to the Buddhist *milieu* and freely adjusted to fit the new context. Let us examine some examples of this creative “syncretistic” approach.

4. In the following comment Sengzhao describes Vimalakīrti’s benevolent attitude towards the beings. As the story goes, the great bodhisattva pretends to be ill and conforms to the suffering of the beings just in order to create the conditions for a great dharma-gathering to happen; the doctrines exposed in such wonderful occurrence will benefit a great number of beings. The

commentator uses here a series of four sentences taken from *Laozi* 8<sup>554</sup> (I have underlined them in the translation below) which describe the virtues exemplified by the water, and adapts them to the Buddhist *mieleu* for characterizing the compassionate and skillful behavior of the bodhisattva:

〔爾時長者維摩詰，自念：“寢疾于床，〕世尊大慈寧不垂愍？”

肇曰。上善若水，所以洿隆斯順；

與善仁，能曲成無悞；

動善時至 (read with variant -)，所以會幾 (read with variant 機) 不失；

居眾人之所惡，故能與彼同疾。

世尊大慈，必見垂問，因以弘道所濟良多。此現疾之本意也。《注維摩詰經》卷 2 〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 343, c20-24)

[At that time the Elder Vimalakīrti thought to himself, “I am lying sick in bed.] How can the World-honored One, He of Great Compassion, not take pity on me?” (MR, p. 85)

SZ: The most excellent is comparable to water, that is why [Vimalakīrti] is able to adapt to the high and the low (*i.e.* to all kinds of situations); [water’s] excellence with regard to giving is its being kindly, that is why [Vimalakīrti] can benefit [the beings] in multiple ways without parsimony; [water’s] excellence with regard to action is its timeliness, that is why [Vimalakīrti] can always seize the opportunity [for action]; [water] dwells in a place abhorred by the men of the crowd, that is why [Vimalakīrti] is able to conform to the illness of the beings.

The World-honored One, He of Great Compassion, seeing [that Vimalakīrti is ill] will surely inquire about his illness, [in this way a dharma gathering will be held in which] the spreading of the Way will benefit a great number of beings. This is the basic motive of the pretended illness.

Besides the series of quotes from *Laozi*, we may notice that also the sentence *qucheng wulin* 曲成無悞 (to “benefit [the beings] in multiple ways without parsimony”) is in turn a rephrasing of the expression *qucheng wanwu er buyi* 曲成萬物而不遺 (“to benefit [the beings] in multiple ways without neglecting any of them”) from the *Xici* 系辭 section of the *Book of Changes*.

Here the impression is that the commentator is driven by a series of mental associations where symbolic patterns impregnated with strong normative power are evoked one after the other in an uninterrupted sequence. Indeed, the mind of the Chinese *literatus* is deeply immersed in this world of symbols and suggestions which are crystallized in the *Classics*; and his thinking articulates by combining them into ever-new meaningful sequences and structures. Given these premises, to “extract” certain images or expressions from the ancient texts and applying them to one’s own discourse is perfectly legitimate and even commendable.

5. In chapter 12 Sengzhao adapts two verses from *Laozi* 26<sup>555</sup> to the needs of his exegesis and uses them to describe Vimalakīrti’s meditative absorption preceding the display of numinous powers:

<sup>554</sup> Cf. the original passage in *Laozi* 8 (transl. from Wagner 2003 (a), pp. 142 - 143): “**The most excellent is comparable to water**. Water excels in being of use to the ten thousand entities while not struggling [with them], **dwelling [as it does] in a place abhorred by the men of the crowd**. That is why [water] is close to the Way. [Water’s] excellence with regard to [its] station is [its lowly] place; its excellence with regard to [its] heart is [its] depth; **its excellence with regard to giving is its being kindly**; its excellence with regard to words is its sincerity; its excellence with regard to government is its [achievement of] well-regulatedness; its excellence with regard to [the handling of] affairs is its capability; **its excellence with regard to action is its timeliness**. Generally speaking, it is only because it is not struggling [with other entities] that there is no resentment [against it]. This means that water corresponds in all these [qualities] to this Way.” 上善若水。水善利萬物而不爭，處眾人之所惡，故幾於道。居善地，心善淵，與善仁，言善信，正善治，事善能，動善時。夫唯不爭，故無尤。

<sup>555</sup> Cf. the full text of *Laozi* 26 (transl. from Wagner 2003 (a), p. 207): “**the heavy is the basis of the light, the calm is the lord of the impetuous**. That is why the Sage does not leave the heavy carts [of the army where the weapons and provisions are carried even if] the march continues through the whole day; he remains calm and aloof even when there are [enemy] camps with watch towers [where he marches with his army]. What will happen if someone [is] lord over ten thousand war chariots but is with his own person light [and impetuous] towards All



[以右手斷取[...]] 入此世界，猶持華鬘，示一切眾。作是念已，入於三昧，現神通力。

肇曰。重為輕根，靜為躁君。非三昧之力。無以運神足之勳。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9 〈見阿閼佛品 12〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 413, a25-27)

**“I will grasp it (=the Wondrous Joy world) in my right hand [...] bringing it into this world like carrying a flower garland, to show all the congregations.” Thinking this thought, [Vimalakīrti] entered samādhi and manifested the power of numinous transformation (MR, p. 168).**

SZ: The heavy is the basis of the light, the calm is the lord of the impetuous. Without the power of samādhi there is no way to activate the supernatural power of numinous transformation.

The idea expressed here is that the calmness of meditative absorption provides the basis for the impetuous display of the tremendous numinous powers allowing (in this case) to carry the entire Wondrous Joy world in the right hand and bring it down into this world system for showing it to the congregation.

6. In the following comment two sentences from Wang Bi’s 王弼 *Laozi Commentary*<sup>556</sup> (which, incidentally, express Wang Bi’s most fundamental philosophical position, viz. the need of grasping the meaning of the “fundamental non-being” (*benwu* 本無) in order to make sense of the complex and apparently chaotic and fuzzy phenomenal world) are quoted almost *verbatim* and serve the rather prosaic task of explaining the fact that by focusing in the first place on fundamental matters it is possible to settle the derived problems. In this specific case, Sengzhao suggests that one should focus on the mind itself and carefully analyze it; once its existence in the three places has been confuted, also the transgression and defilement arising from it are proved to be unreal:

[如佛所說，心垢故眾生垢，心淨故眾生淨。心亦不在內、不在外、不在中間，] 如其心然，罪垢亦然。

肇曰。尋知其本也。夫執本以知其末。守母以見其子。佛言：“眾生垢淨，皆由心起”。求心之本，不在三處。心既不在，罪垢可知也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 3 〈3 弟子品〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 356, a1-4)

**[As the Buddha has explained, when their minds are defiled, sentient beings are defiled. When their minds are purified, sentient beings are purified. The mind likewise does not reside within, does not reside without, and does not reside in the middle.] Just so is the mind, and just so are transgression and defilement (MR, p. 93).**

SZ: This is a matter of knowing the root. “By sizing the root (=fundamental aspect) one can know the branches (=secondary matters), by holding fast to the mother one can see the child”.

[In the sūtra text] the Buddha says that the purity and defilement of the beings arise from the mind; and if one investigates the fundamental [issue of the existence of the] mind, [he finds that] this is not found in the three places (*i.e.* within, without and in the middle). If the mind is not found, the inexistence of transgression and defilement can be easily inferred.

7. At the beginning of chapter 4 the Buddha asks Maitreya to go inquire about Vimalakīrti’s illness. He declines the invitation relating that in the past, when he was explaining the practice of the stage of irreversibility to the heavenly king of the Tuṣita Heaven and his subordinates, he was criticized by Vimalakīrti; in that circumstance the layman had proved to possess a much greater wisdom than his. Commenting this passage Kumārajīva is clearly embarrassed: how could he

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Under Heaven? Being light [towards it], he will lose the basis! Being impetuous [towards it], he will lose his princely [position]! 重為輕根，靜為躁君。是以聖人終日行不離輜重。雖有榮觀，燕處超然。奈何萬乘之主，而以身輕天下？輕則失本，躁則失君。

<sup>556</sup> See Wang Bi’s *Laozi zhilüe* 老子指略: “to venerate the root in order to bring to rest its branches; to hold fast to the mother in order to preserve the child” 崇本以息末，守母以存子。

explain the fact that such an eminent figure as Maitreya, the teacher of the gods and Buddha's successor to the throne of enlightenment, is depicted as inferior to Vimalakīrti? He ends up with providing no less than three alternative possible explanations:

「於是佛告彌勒菩薩。

佛曰。彌勒既紹尊位。又當於此土而成佛。眾情所宗故先命之。彌勒、維摩大小之量，未可定也。或云。維摩雖大或有以而不成佛。或云。彌勒雖大將有為而故辭行，或此是分身彌勒非其正體。以此三緣故有致屈之迹也。[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 360, b29-c5)

**At this point the Buddha addressed Maitreya Bodhisattva** (MR, p. 97).

**K:** Maitreya will succeed [the Buddha] in the honorable position [of the enlightened One], moreover he will become a buddha in this world of ours. Being highly respected by all the beings he is addressed first [by the Buddha]. As to Vimalakīrti and Maitreya, it is impossible to state whether one is superior to the other. We might say that even though Vimalakīrti is great, for some reason he has not yet become a Buddha; or we may point out that even though Maitreya is great, there are still conditions that make him refuse Buddha's exhortation to go [inquire about Vimalakīrti's illness]; or again we might say that this is just a transformation body and not Maitreya itself. It might be for one of these three reasons that Maitreya submits to Vimalakīrti [after debating with him].

Sengzhao seems to be much more at ease than his master in supplying an explanation for this matter. He does not argue about the superiority of one character over the other, but *more sinico* focuses instead on the great performance deriving from their interaction; drawing from the Chinese tradition, he compares the two to “the plasterer and Carpenter Shi”, and their respective teachings to the Confucian and Moist doctrines, which are seen as complementary rather than competing:

「於是佛告彌勒菩薩。汝行詣維摩詰問疾。彌勒白佛言世尊我不堪任詣彼問疾所以者何憶念我昔為兜率天王及其眷屬」說不退轉地之行。[...]

肇曰。下呵云：“實無發心亦無退者”。以此而推，似存不退之行，以勸發無上之心也。雖曰勝期，猶未免乎累。教迹不泯故致斯呵。然經云：“補處大士心無不一，智無不周，應物而動”。何闕之有？是由得失同懷，脩短迭應。利彼而動，無計諸己。故彌勒假有以啟始，淨名居宗以濟終。互為郢匠，器彼淳朴。雖復迹同儒墨，致教不一。然相成之美，實存其中矣。《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 360, c20-p. 361, a4)

**[At this point the Buddha addressed Maitreya Bodhisattva, “You go inquire about Vimalakīrti's illness.” Maitreya addressed the Buddha, “World-honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why? I remember once in the past when] I was explaining the practice of the stage of irreversibility for the heavenly king of the Tuṣita Heaven and his subordinates [...]** (MR, p. 97).

**SZ:** Further on [in the text] Maitreya is criticized because: “There is actually no one who generates the intention to achieve *anuttarā samyaksambodhi*, and there is no one who retrogresses”. Inferring from this, it seems that he still maintained the action of non-retrogressing in order to exhort [his audience] to express the intention of achieving *anuttarā samyaksambodhi*. Even though one might say that the audience [in this way] will have a wonderful expectation, nonetheless this will not avoid the hindrances [created by the teaching]. Since the visible traces of the teaching are not wiped away [using the conception of emptiness] he is criticized [by Vimalakīrti]. However, a sūtra says: “The great being who is bound to achieve buddhahood in a single lifetime (i.e. Maitreya) has a unified mind and an all-encompassing wisdom; he acts responding to [the needs of] the beings”. What mistakes could he possibly make? Acquisition and loss are equal to him, he alternatively responds [to the needs of the beings] by adapting to the long and the short (i.e. to the different circumstances); he operates for benefitting the others without maintaining any selfish concern. And it is for such

reasons that Maitreya relies on conventional existence for exposing a preliminary [teaching] while Vimalakīrti resides [with his mind] in the supreme principle [of emptiness] for leading the congregation to the ultimate. They are for each other “the plasterer and Carpenter [Shi]”, [in cooperating with each other] they bring out each-other’s qualities. Even though they appear to be opposed to each other and deliver different teachings like the Confucians and the Moists, nonetheless in their interaction we can find the beauty of two mutually complementing approaches.

The famous story of the plasterer and Carpenter Shi evoked by Sengzhao is found in the chapter *Xu Wukui* 徐無鬼 of the *Zhuangzi*:

Zhuangzi was accompanying a funeral when he passed by the grave of Huizi. He turned round and said to his attendants: “There was once a plasterer who, if he got a smear of plaster on the tip of his nose no thicker than a fly’s wing, would get his friend Carpenter Shi to slice it off for him. Carpenter Shi, whirling his hatchet with a noise like the wind, would accept the assignment and proceed to slice, removing every bit of mud without injury to the nose, while the plasterer just stood there completely unperturbed. Lord Yuan of Sung, hearing of this feat, summoned Carpenter Shi and said, ‘Could you try performing it for me?’ But Carpenter Shi replied, ‘It’s true that I was once able to slice like that - but the material I worked on has been dead these many years.’ Since you died, Master Hui, I have had no material to work on. There’s no one I can talk to any more.” (transl. from Watson 2013, pp. 205 - 206)

8. In other of his explanations Sengzhao resorts again to themes and expressions clearly echoing the *Zhuangzi*, particularly the chapter *Qiwu lun* 齊物論 in which the identity of all things and the ultimate coincidence of affirmation and negation are exposed by using philosophical argumentations, metaphors and apologues. See for example the following two comments (the expressions recalling the *Zhuangzi* are underlined in the text):

不壞於身而隨一相。

什曰。身即一相。不待壞而隨也。肇曰。萬物齊旨，是非同觀，一相也。然則身即一相。豈待壞身滅體，然後謂之一相乎 [···] 《注維摩詰經》卷 3 〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 350, a25-28)

**Do not destroy the body, yet accord with the single characteristic**<sup>557</sup> (MR, pp. 88 - 89)

**K:** The body is the single characteristic. One does not need to wait for the destruction of the body in order to accord with [the single characteristic].

**SZ:** To consider the myriad things as equal, to regard affirmation and negation as identical: this is the “single characteristic”. Therefore, the body [already] coincides with the single characteristic; it is not that it will coincide with it only after undergoig destruction.

若須菩提不見佛不聞法 [乃可取食]

肇曰。猶誨以平等也。夫若能齊是非、一好醜者。雖復上同如來，不以為尊。下等六師，不以為卑。何則？天地一指，萬物一觀。邪正雖殊，其性不二。豈有如來獨尊而六師獨卑乎？[···] 《注維摩詰經》卷 3 〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 350, c2-6)

**‘Subhūti [you should only accept this food] if you can neither see the Buddha nor hear the Dharma** (MR, p. 89).

**SZ:** Subhūti is taught [by Vimalakīrti] with the teaching of equanimity. If one is able to consider affirmation and negation as equal and to see good and bad as one, even being like a Tathāgata he wouldn’t consider himself honorable, even being at the same level of the Six Heterodox Teachers he wouldn’t regard himself as despicable. Why is it so? Heaven and earth are equal in meaning, the myriad things coincide in one perspective. Even though the heterodox doctrines and the Buddhist one are different, their nature is [actually] the same (*i.e.* they are

<sup>557</sup> *Yixiang* 一相, the “single characteristic”, is the characteristic shared by all things, *i.e.* the “absence of characteristic” 無相, *i.e.* emptiness)

both empty). How could it be that the Tathāgata is to be honored and the Six Heterodox Masters are to be despised? [...]

Starting from the Western Jin the *Zhuangzi* gained a growing popularity among *literati* becoming one of their favourite topics of discussion during the *qingtan* meetings. The renewed interest for this text was primarily due to the composition of two highly influential commentaries on it by the Xuanxue philosophers Xiang Xiu 向秀 (227 - 277) and Guo Xiang 郭象 (252 - 312).

These works had elaborated a whole set of ontological concepts and theories from which the Buddhists borrowed heavily; they used them as hermeneutical tools for making sense of the often obscure Prajñāpāramitā texts they had to interpret without the aid of the Mādhyamika Scholastic literature.

During Kumārajīva's times the problem of the interpretation of the Prajñāpāramitā texts had been overcome thanks to the new translations and the Mādhyamika treatises now available in Chinese. However, the Kuchean master's disciples (and Sengzhao among them) continued to blend Buddhist and Taoist theories with great *nonchalance* driven by the belief that they substantially shared the same basic views and concerns.

### 2.2.6 The format of Sengzhao's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*

As to the format of Sengzhao's *Commentary*, it can be certainly stated that it was originally (*i.e.* before being assembled in T1775) of the interlinear type. In fact, the annotations (including long explanations, but also short glosses explaining single terms or expressions) follow the text in its entirety, to the point that it would be extremely hard to read it without the sūtra text being reproduced *in toto* as reference.

Such view is corroborated by the discovery at Dunhuang and Turfan of numerous manuscripts (Zheng Acai has collected 13 of them<sup>558</sup>) containing fragments or larger portions of the separate commentary by Sengzhao. Among these, two documents are particularly important due to the consistent length of the text preserved and the early date of composition; they are called *Weimojiejing jie* 維摩詰經解 (such title is found on one of the two documents) and were found in Dunhuang<sup>559</sup>. The scholar Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉 (1866 - 1940) first collated and published them in 1938<sup>560</sup>. Both texts are incomplete and include only the first three chapters of Kumārajīva's version of the sūtra plus comment. The sūtra text is written in large characters and Sengzhao's comments are inserted after the commented units in small characters on two lines; Sengzhao's entries are not introduced by the script "Sengzhao said" (*Zhao yue* 肇曰) which is used in the collective commentary for distinguishing the monk's comments from the others. These documents are very early: Luo Zhenyu in his brief introduction claims that they were produced right under the Later Qin<sup>561</sup>.

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<sup>558</sup> Zheng Acai 2018, pp. 108 - 130

<sup>559</sup> See on these texts Usuda Junzō 1977, Chi Limei 2001, Ceng Xiaohong 2008, p. 50, Zheng Acai 2018, pp. 125 - 127

<sup>560</sup> See Luo Zhenyu 1937, pp. 386 - 440

<sup>561</sup> Luo Zhenyu 1937, p. 387

### 3. Peering at the Sun through a Window: Daosheng's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*

Daosheng's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* (which according to some catalogues<sup>562</sup> was originally in 3 fascicles) was certainly written after Kumārajīva's and Sengzhao's ones. In fact, the *Chu sanzang jiji* informs us that:

「關中沙門僧肇，始注《維摩》，世咸翫味。及生更發深旨，顯暢新異。講學之匠，咸共憲章其所述。《維摩》、《法華》、《泥洹》、《小品》諸經義疏，世皆寶焉。」  
《出三藏記集》卷 15 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 111, b3-6)

The śramaṇa from Chang'an Sengzhao first commented the *Vimalakīrti[nirdeśa]* and all his contemporaries carefully studied [the text]. Then [Dao]sheng further disclosed its deep meaning clearly exposing a new, original [interpretation of it]. All the Buddhist preachers adopted his exposition.

[Daosheng's] expository commentaries on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, *Lotus sūtra*, *Nirvāṇasūtra* and *Lesser Prajñāpāramitā* were all highly regarded by everyone.

Even though some scholars believe that Daosheng's commentary was written in Chang'an between 407 and the late summer of 408 (i.e., between the translation of the sūtra in 406 and the monk's departure from the city)<sup>563</sup> its composition is almost certainly later than that. For example, Tang Yongtong points out that in the year 410 Sengzhao had sent a letter to the recluse of Mount Lu Liu Yimin to which was attached his own commentary on the text<sup>564</sup> and deduces that Daosheng's one must have been composed after that date<sup>565</sup>. As other scholars have proposed<sup>566</sup>, in the absence of more cogent pieces of evidence I assume that this work was composed (or at least drafted) in the first years after Daosheng's return to Jianye (i.e. 409).

Tang also suggests that the notes by Daosheng included in T1775 and in the *Jingming Guanzhong shu* 淨名關中疏 [T2777] represent only a partial reproduction of the original work<sup>567</sup>. This seems a quite plausible hypothesis, considered the fact that Daosheng's commentary is significantly shorter than Kumārajīva's one, which counts the same number of fascicles.

As to the content of this *Commentary* and the commentarial approach adopted by Daosheng, these are markedly different from those of the other two commentaries formerly discussed. In fact, Daosheng does not show a special interest for the Indian cultural background nor for the explanation of Sanskrit terms. Strongly relying on theories and terminology belonging to the Xuanxue philosophical discourse, he creates a synthesis between different Buddhist theories (as a matter of fact his elaboration is not confined to the Mādhyamika doctrine conveyed by the sūtra<sup>568</sup>), and between Indian and Chinese cultural elements. At the basis of such comprehensive and creative elaboration is the personality of a highly independent thinker and his holistic cosmic

<sup>562</sup> Cf. Fajing's 法經 (d.u.) *Zhongjing mulu* 眾經目錄 [T2146] (594) and Eichō's 永超 *Tōiki dentō mokuroku* 東域傳燈目錄 [T2183] (1094).

<sup>563</sup> E.g. the Chinese scholar Xu Kangsheng (Xu Kangsheng 1998, p. 132)

<sup>564</sup> This information is found in Sengzhao's letter to Liu Yimin which is preserved in *Zhaolun* T1858. Cf. in particular the passage p. 155, c27-p. 156, a1.

<sup>565</sup> Cf. Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 465. Kim holds that "Tao-sheng was motivated to write his commentary by Seng-zhao's commentary, which was sent to Lushan in 410, when he was in Jiannkang after a brief sojourn at Lushan in 408 to 409. Daosheng's commentary thus can be dated not long after 410". (Kim 1990, p. 53)

<sup>566</sup> This is also the opinion of Liebenenthal (cf. Liebenenthal 1955 (a), p. 312) and Kim (cf. Kim 1990, p. 53).

<sup>567</sup> Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 5, p. 93

<sup>568</sup> This is due on the one side to his character of independent thinker and on the other to his complex life trajectory which led him to be exposed to different Buddhist teachings and theories. While Sengzhao passed away in Chang'an at a very young age after working side by side with Kumārajīva for 13 years, Daosheng spent in that city only the years between 405 and 408.

vision which works as a framework within which Buddhist theories and texts are assessed and discussed.

Moreover, Daosheng's notes do not accompany the full sūtra text sentence by sentence<sup>569</sup> but tend to focus on specific passages of interest where the monk explains a topic by contextualizing it into the broader background of his world-view. Probably this is the reason why unlike Sengzhao and Kumārajīva he never quotes any scripture for validating his arguments, giving the impression that he does not regard the text as a separate "entity" delivering a particular truth, but rather as a small fragment in which a more comprehensive universal truth is reflected. Other than explaining the text *per se*, the true aim of the commentator is to capture and describe such reflection.

In my opinion, the interest of Daosheng's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* lies on the one hand in the fact that it contains *in nuce* some important conceptions which Daosheng would develop in his later works, and on the other in the fact that it clearly shows how the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* played a role in influencing the formation of his world-view and in stimulating some of his original ideas.

In order to properly approach and analyse Daosheng's *Commentary* it is necessary in the first place to understand the monk's complex life trajectory and the different influences that contributed to shape his Buddhist thought. This will provide us with a good insight into his commentarial approach and help us recognize the topics and concepts that meet with his personal philosophical interests and that come to constitute the focus of discussion in the *Commentary* itself.

### 3.1 Notes on Daosheng's biography

I do not intend here to go into each and every detail of Daosheng's biography<sup>570</sup>. Instead, I will offer a synthetic overview of the monk's life trajectory outlining the major lines along which his personal world view developed.

Daosheng's life can be roughly divided into three periods. Each of them is marked by the monk's extended stay in a different geographical location (namely Mount Lu, Chang'an and Jianye) where he became involved in different activities and focused on the study of distinct "branches" of the Buddhist doctrine<sup>571</sup>.

#### 1. Novitiate in Jianye and first residence on Mount Lu

Daosheng, whose secular surname was Wei 魏, was born in Pengcheng 彭城 (the present day Xuzhou 徐州) around 360. In 371 or 372 he left home following Zhu Fatai 竺法汰 (Dao'an's fellow student) as a novice and moved to the Waguan Temple 瓦官寺 in Jianye (the present-day Nanjing). Extremely talented as a young student, he was able to read and memorize the Buddhist scriptures with exceptional ease. "When studying and pondering on the meaning of some passages, he was able to explain them by himself; so at the age of fifteen he had [already]

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<sup>569</sup> Eg. in *Chapt 2* we find just one commentarial entry and in *Chapt. 6* no more than 4 short comments.

<sup>570</sup> For a detailed account of Daosheng's biography see Tang Yongtong 2000, pp. 456 - 465, Liebenenthal 1955 (a) and Kim 1990, pp. 38 - 52

<sup>571</sup> This three-fold analysis of Daosheng's life and Buddhist career has been adopted by the majority of the scholars who have studied this topic, e.g. Tang Yongtong (Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 5, p. 88) and Kim; the latter clearly points out that "throughout his Buddhist career Tao-sheng thus took residence at three locations in main: Chien-k'ang for some thirty-six years altogether for two periods, Lu-shan for about thirteen years for three periods, and Ch'ang-an for three years. Granted that the three locales stood for and were evolving three different patterns of tradition in apprehending the Buddhist doctrines, Tao-sheng was exposed to and provided with as many sources for his own nurture and maturity as a Buddhist thinker, a rare fortune distinguishing him from other contemporary Buddhists, though a result made from his own choice" (Kim 1990, p. 48).



climbed up the podium from which the lectures [on the sūtras] were delivered”<sup>572</sup>. He was also a skilled debater and “the renowned learned monks and famous scholars of that age [when debating with him] saw their argumentations being confuted and their words come to exhaustion, and were unable to resist [his eloquence]”<sup>573</sup>.

Unfortunately very little is known about Daosheng’s Buddhist training during these early formative years and the interesting view formulated by Kim that “what Tao-sheng learned at Lushan and Ch’ang-an might have merely reinforced and consolidated the basic knowledge he had acquired at Chien-k’ang”<sup>574</sup> remains, as the scholar himself admits, a mere working hypothesis.

Probably upon the death of his master (387), “in his middle age (*i.e.* between his thirties and forties), in order to complete his education Daosheng wandered through many different places [increasing his knowledge] by extensively collecting different [doctrines and theories]”<sup>575</sup>. During the last years of the Taiyuan era 太元 (376 - 396)<sup>576</sup>, he reached Mount Lu 廬山 and settled down there for seven years. There he met with the leader of the Buddhist community Huiyuan 慧遠 (334 - 416) and studied the Abhidharma theories from the Kashmiri master Saṃghadeva 僧伽提婆. However, as Liebenthal states, “very little influence of this study is noticeable in his writing”<sup>577</sup>.

Kim has tried to figure out what kind of influences the peculiar kind of Buddhism that was practiced on Mt Lu<sup>578</sup> could have possibly exerted on Daosheng<sup>579</sup> and has pointed out the major differences setting apart the two personalities of Daosheng and Huiyuan: as to their philosophical views, “metaphysically and practically [...] Hui-yuan is more or less a dualist who distinguishes, for one thing, between the two orders, secular and sacred, while Tao-sheng’s way of thinking appears to have a somewhat monistic tinge”<sup>580</sup>; as to their approach to the scriptures, “in general, Hui-yuan remained more conservative, sometimes doggedly faithful and adherent to the literal meaning of the texts including monastic rules (*vinaya*), whereas Tao-sheng is [...] more liberal and sometimes aptly revolutionary with a wider perspective, often boldly rejecting the literal sense -- yet remaining original and faithful to the spirit -- of a text”<sup>581</sup>.

## 2. Residence in Chang’an

In 405, upon knowing that the great Buddhist master Kumārajīva had reached the Later Qin capital, Daosheng “together with [three other companions, namely] Huirui 慧叡 of the Shixing Monastery, Huiyan 慧嚴 of the Dong’an Monastery and Huiguan 慧觀 from the Daochang Monastery headed [north] to Chang’an for studying with Kumārajīva; all members of the Guanzhong Buddhist saṃgha praised him for his outstanding capacity to understand [the Buddhist doctrines]”<sup>582</sup>. We know from the sources that Daosheng was also highly regarded by

<sup>572</sup> 「研味句義，即自解說。是以年在志學，便登講座。」《出三藏記集》卷 15 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 110, c15-16)

<sup>573</sup> 「雖宿望學僧、當世名士，皆慮挫辭窮，莫能抗敵。」《出三藏記集》卷 15 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 110, c17-18)

<sup>574</sup> Kim 1990, p. 49

<sup>575</sup> 「中年遊學，廣搜異聞」《廣弘明集》卷 23 (CBETA, T52, no. 2103, p. 265, c22)

<sup>576</sup> This what Tang Yongtong says (Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 458). Liebenthal and Kim both say this happened in 397 (cf. Liebenthal 1955 (a) p. 286 and Kim 1990, p. 40).

<sup>577</sup> Liebenthal 1955 (a), p. 68

<sup>578</sup> The most important features of this peculiar kind of Buddhism are - as Zürcher explains - “Buddhist philosophy and Xuanxue, dhyāna and the cult of the supernatural, the beauty of nature and the ascetic life, *qingtian*, scholarship and artistic activities, unworldliness and political neutrality”. For a detailed discussion of the Buddhist practices and beliefs cultivated by the Buddhist devotees and monks at Mt Lu see Zürcher 2007, pp. 208 - 231

<sup>579</sup> See Kim 1990, pp. 40 - 41

<sup>580</sup> Kim 1990, pp. 41 - 42

<sup>581</sup> Kim 1990, p. 41

<sup>582</sup> 「遂與始興慧叡、東安慧嚴、道場慧觀同往長安，從羅什受學。關中僧眾，咸稱其秀悟。」《出三藏記集》卷 15 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 110, c26-28)

the king Yao Xing in person who once asked him to challenge Daorong (one of Kumārajīva's chief assistants) in debate<sup>583</sup>. As Kim has argued, it was probably in this kind of debates and oral discussions that Daosheng distinguished himself, more than in the aid provided as assistant during the translation work; in fact, “despite his registered fame and honour, [...] Tao-sheng does not figure prominently in any record as a close assistant to Kumārajīva in his translation activities as does Sengrui [...] or Sengzhao [...]”<sup>584</sup>.

During Daosheng's stay in Chang'an, many important sūtras were translated, namely the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and *Lotus Sūtra* in 406 and the *Lesser Prajñāpāramitā* in 408; and it might be more than a mere coincidence that in later years the monk wrote commentaries on each of these works. The translation and preaching sessions he had attended in Chang'an might have left a profound trace in him stimulating his further inquiry into the meaning of those scriptures.

By the end of the summer 408, probably shortly after the translation of the *Lesser Prajñāpāramitā* was completed, Daosheng left Chang'an and moved south to Jianye 建業 (Nanjing). On the way back he stopped off at Mount Lu and delivered Sengzhao's treatise *Prajñā Has no Knowledge* 般若無知論 to the recluse Liu Yimin<sup>585</sup>.

### 3. Return to Jianye and last years on Mt. Lu

Arrived in Jianye in 409, Daosheng settled at the Qingyuan Temple 青園寺 (which from 423 on would be called Longguang Temple 龍光寺). Apparently, he already enjoyed a great fame in the city, since he was held in high esteem by emperor Wen of the Liu Song 宋文帝 and eminent literati like Wang Hong 王弘 (379 - 432), Fan Tai 范泰 (355 - 428) and Yan Yanzhi 顏延之 (384 - 456).

It was apparently during these years that he reflected upon the doctrines and theories he had come across during his travels and reached a personal synthesis of the Buddhist doctrine. This process is described in the following important passage of his biography in *Chu sanzang jiji*:

「遊學積年，備總經論。妙貫龍樹大乘之源，兼綜提婆小道之要。博以異聞，約以一  
致。乃喟然而嘆曰：“夫象以盡意，得意則象忘；言以寄理，入理則言息<sup>586</sup>。自經典  
東流，譯人重阻。多守滯文，鮮見圖 (read with variant 圓) 義。若忘筌取魚，則可與言  
道矣”。於是校練空、有，研思因、果，乃立善不受報及頓悟義。籠罩舊說，妙有淵  
旨。而守文之徒，多生嫌嫉。與奪之聲，紛然互起。」《出三藏記集》卷 15 (CBETA,  
T55, no. 2145, p. 110, c29-p. 111, a7)

[After] many years of itinerant learning, [Daosheng] had gained a comprehensive mastery of  
[the Buddhist] sūtras and śāstras. [He] wonderfully penetrated the source of Nāgārjuna's  
Mahāyāna [teaching] and reached a comprehensive synthesis [between it and] the essentials

<sup>583</sup> This event is related in *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 [T2060], which reads as follows: “at the time when Zhu Daosheng entered Chang'an, Yao Xing met him in the Xiaoyao Park and let him [engage in debate and] confute Daorong's theory. Daosheng answered back to [Daorong's argumentations] a hundred times, his words being always accurate and to the point. All the monks [attending the debate] observed his refined demeanor and admired his outstanding talent.” 「昔竺道生入長安，姚興於逍遙園見之。使難道融義。往復百翻，言無不切。眾皆觀其風神，服其英秀。」《續高僧傳》卷 5 (CBETA, T50, no. 2060, p. 462, a16-18)

<sup>584</sup> See Kim 1990, pp. 43 - 44

<sup>585</sup> See Liu Yimin's letter to Sengzhao dating 409: “Last year at the end of summer I saw for the first time the Venerable [Dao]sheng who showed me your treatise *Prajñā has no Knowing*” 「去年夏末，始見生上人，示《無知論》。」《肇論》卷 1 (CBETA, T45, no. 1858, p. 155, a10-11) and Sengzhao's answer dating 410: “The venerable [Dao]sheng stayed here with us [in Chang'an] for a few years. Whenever we spoke, we mentioned you with admiration. Unexpectedly he returned south and [, as I knew from your letter,] you have met him. [But apart from that news,] I did not receive any letter from him and feel unspeakably uneasy” 「生上人頃在此同止數年，至於言話之際，常相稱詠。中途還南，君得與相見。未更近問，惘惘何言！」《肇論》卷 1 (CBETA, T45, no. 1858, p. 155, c21-23)

<sup>586</sup> This passage is but a rephrasing of Wang Bi's exegetical guidelines for the interpretation of the *Book of Changes* exposed in *Zhouyi lieli* 周易略例 (cf. the *Ming xiang* 明象 section of this work)

of Samghadeva's Hīnayāna [doctrine]. He broadened his knowledge by being exposed to different ideas and found a synthesis [between those] by finding their common insight. Then he sighed: "Indeed, images [serve to] fully convey the meaning, once the meaning has been seized they should be forgotten; words [serve to] deliver the Principle, once the Principle has been penetrated they should come to an end. Since the Buddhist sūtras were spread eastwards, [due to their incompetence] the translators caused a whole series of hindrances [to the comprehension of their meaning]. Most [Buddhists] stuck to those fallacious translations and only few [of them] were able to see the complete meaning [that was behind them]. If only someone could be able to forget about the fish trap upon catching the fish, I could discuss with him about the Way!"<sup>587</sup>. Hence, he examined [the theories exposing] emptiness and existence, and reflected on the law of karma (*lit.* causes and effects), then formulated [the theory that] "Good actions are not rewarded" and the "theory of Sudden enlightenment". [In this way] he surpassed the previous assumptions and wonderfully held a [new] deep insight. But those who stubbornly stuck to the words [of the translated sūtras] became utterly suspicious and envious. Conflicting opinions that he should be praised or punished [for his ideas] raised against each other.

As we learn from the above passage, relying on his admirable capacity for synthesis Daosheng was able to integrate the diverse theories he had apprehended during his itinerant studies. Significantly, he appears not to consider the Mādhyamika and the Abidharma systems as conflicting<sup>588</sup> but potentially complementary in that both are but revelations of the same ancestral and eternal truth which is symbolized by the Buddha.

Moreover, Daosheng proves to be deeply aware of the problems deriving from the fallacious or incorrect translations circulating in his time. However, he did not chose to actively participate in the translation activity and devote his efforts to improving the quality of the translation output, nor to try to make sense of those often obscure translated texts writing philological commentaries on them, as Dao'an did during the last part of his life; instead, he adopted the Xuanxue exegetical approach and "language theory" which allowed him to grasp the meaning behind the words and not to get stuck on the interpretation of the surface level of the text. As the *Gaoseng zhuan* says it, "[Dao]sheng deeply pondered for long time, then fully fathomed the insight [lying] beyond words"<sup>589</sup>.

Given that this second residence in Jianye marks Daosheng's maturity as a philosopher, it must be right in this period that a consistent part of his writings were composed, or at least drafted.

In 413 the monk Faxian 法顯, who had returned from his travels in India only one year before, reached Jianye. He had carried with himself a Sanskrit copy of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* and translated it at the Daochang Temple 道場寺 with Buddhahadra 佛陀跋陀羅 between 417 and 418. This Chinese version in 6 fascicles was called *Foshuo daban niJuan jing* 佛說大般泥洹經 [T376] and was divided into 18 chapters. After carefully studying this text, Daosheng formulated the unprecedented view that even the iccāntikas (the most base and spiritually deluded of all types of beings) could achieve Buddhahood. This position was hardly criticized and considered heretical by the party of the monks maintaining the old doctrines<sup>590</sup> and he was eventually "exposed to the Buddhist community" (*xian yu dazhong* 顯於大眾)<sup>591</sup>, i.e. accused of heresy and expelled (this occurred around 428~429). Still convinced of the correctness of his views,

<sup>587</sup> This is a reference to the *Waiwu Chapt.* 外物 of the *Zhuangzi*, in which it is said "Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?" 吾安得夫忘言之人，而與之言哉！

<sup>588</sup> The target of Nāgārjuna's criticism is notoriously represented by certain Abidharma tendencies which had gone too far in reifying the elementary constituents of reality.

<sup>589</sup> 「生既潛思日久，徹悟言外。」《高僧傳》卷 7 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 366, c13-14)

<sup>590</sup> 「舊學僧黨以為背經邪說。」《出三藏記集》卷 15 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 111, a10-11)

<sup>591</sup> Tang explains this expression as follows "佛法凡犯戒須於共住中懺悔，或處罰，故罪犯受罰曰顯於眾" (Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 463)

Daosheng left the city and moved to the Tiger Mountains 虎丘 in the north-west of Suzhou (Jiangsu Province) joining his old acquaintance Fagang 法綱. He then proceeded to Mount Lu, where he arrived in 432.

When the complete version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* in 40 fascicles produced by the great translator of the Northern Liang 北涼 (397 - 439) Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (known as “the Northern Version” 北本) was transmitted to the south during the Yuanjia Era 元嘉 of Emperor Wen 文帝 (424 - 453)<sup>592</sup>, it became clear that Daosheng’s views on the *iccāntikas* were correct, since they perfectly matched the words of the *sūtra*. Hence he was rehabilitated and gained a great fame, being celebrated as the “Nirvāṇa Sage” 涅槃聖. The monk spent his last years at the Donglin Temple 東林寺 on Mount Lu, preaching on the *Nirvāṇasūtra* and revising his commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra*. He passed away in 434.

Daosheng’s writings can be roughly divided into four categories, *i.e.* commentaries, treatises (*lun* 論), expositions (*yi* 義) and letters (*shu* 書).

As to the commentaries (which - according to Sengyou - are all of the *yishu* 義疏 type<sup>593</sup>), Daosheng is credited with having composed the following works:

- *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Expository Commentary* 維摩義疏, whose materials are preserved in *Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經 [T1775] and Daoye’s 道液 *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 [T2777];
- *Lesser Prajñāpāramitā Expository Commentary* 小品義疏, now lost;
- *Nirvāṇasūtra Expository Commentary* 泥洹義疏, whose materials are preserved in the collective commentary *Daban niepan jing jijie* 大般涅槃經集解 [T1763];
- *Lotus Sūtra Expository Commentary* 妙法蓮花經疏 [X577], a still extant work composed by the monk in 432, while on Mount Lu.

None of Daosheng’s treatises have been preserved. Only their titles are known, which can give us some idea about their content; these are: *On the Two Truths* 二諦論, *The Buddha Nature is originally endowed [by the beings]* 佛性當有論<sup>594</sup>, *The Dharma-body is not Material* 法身無色論, *The Buddha has no Pure-land* 佛無淨土論, [*Buddha’s*] *response to the beings is based on conditions (i.e. on the efforts of the beings themselves)* 應有緣論.

As to Daosheng’s expositions, we also merely know the bare argument developed. These are: *Good deeds do not bring forward any [religious] reward* 善不受報義, *Buddhahood is achieved through sudden enlightenment* 頓悟成佛義, *On the ‘Thirty six questions’ [that are found] in the Nirvāṇasūtra* 涅槃三十六問, *Discussing the meaning of Buddha-nature* 辯佛性義, *Record of the exposition on the fourteen topics* 十四科元贊義記 (as Tang suggests, this work is most probably a later forgery<sup>595</sup>), *Explaining that [the bodhisattva] with the first thought upon his entering the eight stage [of progression] is likely to achieve nirvāṇa* 釋八住初心欲取泥洹義.

For what regards Daosheng’s correspondence, only a *Letter in which Daosheng answers to Wang [Hong]’s questions [about sudden enlightenment]* 竺道生答王問 is preserved in Xie Lingyun’s 謝靈運 *Bianzong lun* 辯宗論 (see *Hongming ji* 弘明集 [T2103], p. 228, a8-16). Other letters exchanged between Daosheng and Fan Tai 范泰, Fu Ji 傅季 and other monks are listed in

<sup>592</sup> The translation was accomplished in 421 and there is evidence that by the year 430 it had been transmitted to Yangzhou 揚州 (cf. *Sanlun youyi yi* 三論遊意義 [T1855], p. 122, b2-10)

<sup>593</sup> Cf. the following passage from Daosheng’s biography in *Chu sanzang jiji*: 「《維摩》、《法華》、《泥洹》、《小品》諸經義疏，世皆寶焉。」《出三藏記集》卷 15 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 111, b5-6)

<sup>594</sup> On the ancient debate on the interpretation of the expression *dangyou* 當有 in the title of this work see Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 5, pp. 108 - 111

<sup>595</sup> See Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 466

Lu Cheng's 陸澄 catalogue *Datang neidian lu* 大唐內典錄 [T2149], however the content of these documents have not been preserved.

### 3.2 Daosheng's personality and his exegetical approach

According to Tang Yongtong<sup>596</sup>, Daosheng's ability to grasp the truth beyond words thus putting an end to the heated but sterile debates over the interpretation of words and expressions used in the sūtras is comparable to Wang Bi's overcoming of the previous interpretations of the *Book of Changes* based on "images and numbers" (*xiangshu* 象數)<sup>597</sup> elaborated by scholars like Meng Xi 孟喜 (ca. 90 - 40 BC) and Jing Fang 京房 (77 - 36 BC) and extremely popular since the Western Han.

Wang Bi's new approach assumed that "images and numbers" were not important in themselves; they had but the instrumental function of pointing out to an underlying unified meaning of the text.

According to the *Gaoseng zhuan*, Wang Hong's 王宏 nephew Wang Wei 王微 (415 - 443, or 415 - 453), a poet and painter lived during the Southern Dynasty of the Liu-Song 劉宋, "compared Daosheng to Guo Linzong 郭林宗 and wrote a biography on him, praising the virtues he had displayed in his life"<sup>598</sup>. Guo Linzong (alias Guo Tai 郭泰, 128 - 168) had been a very popular figure among the *literati* of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Balazs characterizes him as follows:

He was a giant of nearly six feet six inches tall, so poor that he had to hide the holes in his trousers with his hat, and ate only every other day. He was a great musician and a great traveler, he had a gift of gab that aroused the admiration of intellectual circles at the capital. He liked to exercise his lively mind by making witty remarks about his contemporaries; and his witticism which combined references to the science of physiognomy 相, the categorization of human types 人論, and the "criticism by the pure" or political comments of men of integrity 清議, became legendary<sup>599</sup>.

The association of Daosheng to Guo Tai was most likely due to the monk's maverick personality, the originality of his approach and the independence of his thought. Guo was able to reveal the main features of somebody's character just by observing his appearance, as much as Daosheng could seize the true meaning of a certain scripture only by skillfully looking through the text<sup>600</sup>. Incidentally, it could well be that Daosheng's approach to the conception of Buddha-nature (*Foxing* 佛性) was influenced by the discussions on the categorization of human types and the attempts at describing human-nature (*renxing* 人性) which were so popular among gentry circles in Southern China during the Medieval period<sup>601</sup>. Another key element linking Daosheng to Guotai was no doubt the eloquence and rhetorical skills enabling both men to properly support and defend their unconventional beliefs and to gain a vast recognition.

<sup>596</sup> Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 470 - 471

<sup>597</sup> This kind of exegesis was based on the association of the hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* to the Seasonal Qi 節氣 and the Five Elements 五行, thus creating an intricate, fuzzy system on which basis reality was explained and omens were interpreted.

<sup>598</sup> 「王微以生比郭林宗，乃為之立傳，旌其遺德。」《高僧傳》卷 7 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 367, a18-19)

<sup>599</sup> Balazs 1967, p. 230

<sup>600</sup> Daosheng's ability in finding the true essence of the teaching is often highlighted in the sources. For example, Huiguan's 慧觀 biography in *Gaoseng zhuan* reports that "the people of that time [when assessing the skills of Kumārajīva's disciples] used to say that 'as to attaining the essence [of the doctrine], [Dao]sheng and [Dao]rong come first; as to master the difficult points [of the doctrine], [Hui]guan and [Seng]zhao are the best'". 時人稱之曰：「通情則生、融上首。精難則觀、肇第一。」《高僧傳》卷 7 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 368, b10-12).

<sup>601</sup> The most important work on the categorization of human types on the basis of their talents is Liu Shao's 劉邵 (first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century) *Renwu zhi* 人物誌.

Daosheng was indeed a very independent and insightful thinker, able to find a coherent message behind what others could see only as a confusing puzzle. In a very important passage of the obituary dedicated to him, Huilin 慧琳 (Southern Song 南宋) describes the decisive role played by the monk in driving the Chinese Buddhism of his age out of a very serious impasse:

「羅什大乘之趣。提婆小道之要，咸暢斯旨，究舉其奧。所聞日優，所見踰曠。既而悟曰：“象者，理之所假，執象則迷理。教者，化之所因，束教則愚化。”是以徵名責實，惑於虛誕；求心應事，茫昧格言。自胡相傳，中華承學，未有能出斯域者矣。乃收迷獨運，存履遺跡。於是眾經雲披，群疑氷釋。釋迦之旨，淡然可尋。珍怪之辭，皆成通論。聃、周之申名教，秀、弼之領玄心，於此為易矣。」《廣弘明集》卷 23 (CBETA, T52, no. 2103, p. 265, c23-p. 266, a5)

[Daosheng] made clear the purport of Kumārajīva's Mahāyāna [doctrine] and the essentials of Saṃghadeva's Hīnayāna [theories]; he investigated [both] and revealed their deepest meaning. [The teachings] he heard [during his wandering years] were every day more advanced and made his insight grew deeper and deeper. Soon he suddenly realized [a fundamental truth] and said: "Images are what the Principle relies upon, [however], if one clings to those images, he will be confused about the Principle. The teaching is what conversion derives from, [however], if one confines himself to the teaching, he will be ignorant about conversion". This is why those who examined the names in order to get their real counterpart were thrown into bewilderment by nonsense, and those who aimed at responding to reality with their heart/mind, got confused about the [meaning] of the expressions found in the sūtras. Since the foreign [scriptures] started being transmitted from the foreign [lands] and passed down [from master to disciple] in China, no one was able to overcome this *impasse*.

Hence [Daosheng] collected all the doubtful matters and pondered on them independently, he "preserved the shoes (i.e. the original intention of the authors) and forsook the traces (i.e. the surface meaning of the text, as isolated from that original intention)"<sup>602</sup>. Then [using this approach] he extensively read all the scriptures and gave a definitive explanation to all the doubts [in such a way that] the meaning of Śākyamuni [’s words] could be reached without effort and the precious strange words [of the sūtras] turned into an understandable discourse. Compared to this [hermeneutical achievement], [even] [Lao] Dan's and [Zhuang] Zhou's exposition of the Teaching of Names, [Xiang] Xiu's and [Wang] Bi's grasping of the mysterious mind can be considered easy.

As we learn from this quote, apparently two different approaches to the scriptures were adopted by Daosheng's contemporaries. The first consisted in "examining the names in order to get their real counterpart (or substance)" (*zheng ming ze shi* 徵名責實), which is, trying to establish the real message of the text by comparing the names and terms used in it; this system failed due to the numerous contradictions of the surface text heavily hindering the comprehension. The second method seems opposite to the first; it consisted in "responding to reality by means of the heart/mind" (*qiu xin yingshi* 求心應事), probably meaning to perceive directly the truth beyond words by relying exclusively on one's heart/mind; this approach also proved unreliable, being excessively fideistic and arbitrary and not holding the Buddha's words preserved in the scriptures in the due regard.

Daosheng overcame this impasse by embracing the Xuanxue conception that a Classic could only imperfectly deliver the profound insight of the Sages of the past; it represented nothing but

<sup>602</sup> This expression derives from the *Tianyun Chapt.* 天運 of the *Zhuangzi*, in which it is said that "the Six Classics are the traces left by the Ancient Kings, but they are not 'that by which' they have left them. Now, what you are speaking about (i.e. the Six Classics) are but traces. And the traces are left by the shoes, but they are not the shoes themselves". 夫六經，先王之陳跡也，豈其所以跡哉！今子所言，猶跡也。夫跡，履之所出，而跡豈履哉！On the basis of this passage and some other related ones Guo Xiang elaborated the hermeneutical approach he adopted in his famous and highly influential *Zhuangzi Commentary* 莊子注.



the traces left by their shoes. This is why, as Huilin says, he “preserved the shoes and forsook the traces” (*cun lü yi ji* 存履遺跡), being aware that the words were not important in themselves but only as means for delivering the holy message. Moreover, once such message has been fathomed, “images” (*xiang* 象, i.e. the visible traces pointing to it) and “teachings” (*jiao* 教, i.e. all the different theories elaborated in the sūtras) had to be forsaken; this idea also derives from *Zhuangzi*<sup>603</sup>, even though in Daosheng it assumes deep Buddhist connotations: it represents in fact the transposition on a hermeneutical level of the fundamental Buddhist attitude of non-attachment.

In his hermeneutical approach, Daosheng had been surely influenced by a sūtra like the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* which clearly exposed the inadequacy of language to fully express the truth and often even deliberately plays with its contradictory nature. For example, in *Chapt. 3* *Vimalakīrti* addresses Subhūti who is begging for food with the following paradoxical words:

若須菩提不見佛不聞法 [乃可取食] 《注維摩詰經》卷 3 〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 350, c2)

Subhūti, [you should only accept this food] if you can neither see the Buddha nor hear the Dharma (MR, p. 89).

Daosheng comments as follows:

生曰。此一階使言反而理順也。苟體空內明,不以言反感意矣。須菩提見佛聞法者而言“不見佛、不聞法”(add variant 者),言正反也。若以無佛可見為“不見佛”,無法可聞為“不聞法”,則順理矣。』《注維摩詰經》卷 3 〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 350, c2-15)

DS: In this passage the words are used with opposite meaning, and yet the Principle [they refer to] is respected. If one realizes Emptiness and is illuminated inside [by the light of understanding], his mind won't be confused by words bearing opposite meaning. Subhūti has [indeed] seen the Buddha and heard the Dharma, however [the sūtra says] “if you neither see the Buddha nor hear the Dharma”, which is right the opposite. If “not to see the Buddha” is understood as meaning that “there is [actually] no Buddha you can see”, and “not to hear the Dharma” as meaning that “there is [actually] no Dharma you can hear”, then the Principle is respected.

Daosheng believes that the reading of a text should always be guided by inner wisdom. When the Principle (i.e. the single eternal truth pervading the whole universe) is clearly seen, then words cannot mislead the reader. No matter if they seem to be contradictory or absurd; as far as they are interpreted according to the Doctrine they will not confuse the mind of the devout reader and hinder his comprehension. The same idea is found in chapter 13 of the same scripture where the readers are advised to “rely on four things” (an almost *verbatim* reproduction of the passage is found in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*<sup>604</sup>). I translate this important passage reporting in brackets Daosheng's comments on it:

「依於義,不依語(生曰。不復逐語取相而昧其理也);依於智,不依識(生曰。若(read with variant -)識以著(add variant 相)為情,智以達理為用。終不復從識乖智也);依了義經,不依不了義經(生曰。辨理者,為了義經也。雖曰巧辭而無理者,為了不了義

<sup>603</sup> Cf. the *Waiwu Chapt.* 外物 of the *Zhuangzi*, in which it is said: “The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words.” 筌者所以在魚,得魚而忘筌;蹄者所以在兔,得兔而忘蹄;言者所以在意,得意而忘言。

<sup>604</sup> Cf. *Daban niepan jing* 大般涅槃經 [T374], chapt. 4, p. 401, b25-c1

也。); 依於法, 不依人 (生曰。人行理, 無非法為法也。苟曰有法, 不遺下賤。若無法者, 雖復極貴極高。亦不從之。)。隨順法相, 無所入, 無所歸。」《維摩詰所說經》卷 3 〈法供養品 13〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 556, c9-11)

[The reader of this sūtra] should rely on meanings, not on words (DS: [he] should not cling to the literal word-by-word meaning and ignore the Principle [behind the text]). He should rely on wisdom, not on knowledge (DS: the essence of knowledge is attachment to the characteristics [of what is known]; the function of Wisdom is [instead] to reach the Principle. [One should] never pursue knowledge and [thus] contravene the Principle). He should rely on sūtras of comprehensive meaning and not rely on sūtras of incomplete meaning (DS: [The texts] that analyze the Principle are “sūtras of comprehensive meaning”. [The texts] that, albeit being literary refined, do not deal with the Principle are “sūtras of incomplete meaning”). He will rely on the Dharma and not rely on a person (DS: When a man acts in accord with the Principle, he does not confuse the Dharma with what is [actually] not Dharma. If one possesses the Dharma, he should not discard him because he is of a humble social status, and [vice versa,] if someone does not possess the Dharma, he should not follow him, no matter how noble and lofty he is). He should be in accord with the characteristics of the Dharma, without anywhere that is entered, without any refuge.

Daosheng's understanding of this passage is no doubt influenced by Kumārajīva's previous comment which explains it in great detail:

「什曰。佛言“我泥洹後, 當依止四法, 以為大師。所謂”四依法”也。明此四法可依止、可信受也。依於法不依人者: 法謂經教也。當依經法, 不可以人勝, 故背法依人也。法有二種。一文字語言、二義法。莫依語也。義亦有二種。一識所知義、二智所知義。識則唯求虛妄五欲, 不求實利。智能求實利, 棄五欲。故依智所知義, 不依識所知義。[...]. 智所知義亦有二種: 一了義經、二不了義經。不了義經如佛說殺父母無罪。未分別, 是不了義也。若言無明是父愛是母。生死根本故名父母。斷其本則生死盡。故言殺之無罪。既分別是了義經也。復次若佛言佛是人中第一。涅槃是法中第一。如是等皆明了義也。是故當依了義經莫依不了義經。」《注維摩詰經》卷 10 〈法供養品 13〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 417, a10-25)

K: The Buddha said: “After I have entered nirvāṇa, you should rely on four things and consider them as your Great Master”. These are the so called “Four reliances”, [a term] illustrating the fact that you can rely on them and trust them.

1. [In the expression] “to *rely on the Dharma and not to rely on a person*”, “Dharma” means “the teaching of the sūtras”. One should rely on the Dharma exposed in the scriptures and not consider any man as superior to them; [if one did so] he would contravene the Dharma and rely on a person.

2. [Moreover,] there are two kinds of dharma: the written words and the meaning. *One should never rely on words*.

3. There are also two kinds of meanings: one which is grasped through knowledge and one which is grasped through wisdom. Knowledge only pursues the vain [learning deriving from] the five senses, it does not seek what really benefits men. [Instead,] wisdom can seek what really benefits man and forsake the false knowledge of the five senses. This is why “*one should rely on the meaning which is known through Wisdom, not that which is grasped through [sensorial] knowledge*”. [...]

4. The meaning which is known through Wisdom is [also] of two kinds, *i.e.* [there are] sūtras of comprehensive meaning and sūtras of incomplete meaning. Sūtras like the one in which the Buddha says that there is no guilt in killing the parents without any clarification [of such statement being provided] belong to the second category. [Instead, take as an example a sūtra that] says: “ignorance is the father and attachment is the mother; since [ignorance and attachment] constitute the root of saṃsāric existence they are called ‘father’ and ‘mother’. Once that root is cut off, saṃsāric existence comes to an end, hence it is said ‘there is no guilt in killing [father and mother]’. Since [in this case] a clarification is provided, this is to be called “a sūtra of comprehensive meaning”. Furthermore, if [in certain scriptures] the Buddha says that “the Buddha is the best among men”, “Nirvāṇa is the most important dharma”, these are all

to be called “sūtras of comprehensive meaning”. For this reason, [the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* says that one] “*should rely on sūtras of comprehensive meaning and not rely on sūtras of incomplete meaning*”.

From the discussion undertaken above it emerges that Daosheng blended together Taoist and Buddhist language theories, thus forging his highly original hermeneutical approach to the scriptures. Such method, which refused any dogmatic assumption and sectarian position and firmly opposed “those who held fast to the scriptures” 守文之徒, enabled him to overcome the serious *impasse* generated by misleading translations and by the absence of “doctrinal backup” from India, a phenomenon that characterized Southern Buddhism for a long period of time<sup>605</sup>.

We can notice how Daosheng’s characterization of language is in some respects similar to that formulated by Sengzhao. However, the latter simply maintained the upayic nature of language as it is elaborated in the *Mādhyamika* (albeit enriching it with suggestions derived from the Taoist sources) and never developed those assumptions into a comprehensive hermeneutical strategy for addressing different Buddhist texts and harmonizing different doctrines. Instead, Daosheng’s language theory became a real reading strategy embedded in a much broader philosophical vision in which the various Buddhist scriptures were seen as a dim reverberation of a cosmic principle pervading the whole universe.

### 3.3 Daosheng’s *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Commentary

Before addressing Daosheng’s *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Commentary, it is important to point out that Daosheng not only operated an original synthesis between different (and apparently conflicting) Buddhist doctrines, but he also combined two different kinds of scholarship which had developed respectively in northern and southern China during the period of division. Let us consider a sentence which is found in a passage translated above: “[Daosheng] broadened his knowledge by being exposed to different ideas and found a synthesis [between them] by finding their common insight”<sup>606</sup>. Here the two characters “broad” and (*bo* 博) and “synthetic” (*yue* 約) - which are used in two parallel sentences - represent a clear reference to those different approaches.

In general terms, the South inherited and further developed the Xuanxue philosophical discourse and commentarial approach inquiring into the unifying philosophical meaning of a scripture hidden behind the surface text (*yixue* 義學), whereas the North continued the traditional philological approach of Han dynasty based on glosses and annotations explaining ancient terms and expressions (*xungu* 訓詁)<sup>607</sup>. The *Rulin* section 儒林傳 of the *Sui History* 隋書 well describes the distinctive features of Southern and Northern scholarship during the period of political division: “on the whole, in the writing of commentaries the Southern and the Northern [*literati*] emphasized different aspect. Southerners were essential and concise, they got the blossoms [of a text]; the Northern scholarship was [instead] deep and dispersed, it exhausted the stems [of it]”<sup>608</sup>. This assessment is by no means the result of a retrospective analysis, but reflects instead a well-established opinion dating back to very early times. For example, roughly by the time Kumārajīva was active in Chang’an the monk Zhi Daolin found himself involved in a conversation in which the cultural differences between North and South were discussed:

<sup>605</sup> Cf. on this Zürcher’s remark: “Southern court Buddhism was handicapped by the fact that ever since “the troubles of the Yongjia era” 永嘉之亂 (AD 307 - 313: the loss of northern China and the forced retreat of the Jin to the south) the Jin territory had been cut off from the main line of communication with Central Asia and India. The transcontinental Silk Road had its eastern terminal in present-day western Gansu, with its extension leading to Chang’an and Luoyang, all of which was occupied by “barbarian” states. As a result, no fresh impulses from the Western Regions reached the Eastern Jin court at Jiankang till the very end of the dynasty.” (Zürcher 2013, p. 588)

<sup>606</sup> 「博以異聞，約以一致。」《出三藏記集》卷 15 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 111, a1)

<sup>607</sup> Cf. on this also Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 416

<sup>608</sup> “大抵南北所為章句，好尚互有不同。南人約簡，得其英華。北學深蕪，窮其枝葉 [...]”

褚季野語孫安國云：“北人學問，淵綜廣博”。孫答曰：“南人學問，清通簡要”。支道林聞之曰：“聖賢固所忘言。自中人以還，北人看書，如顯處視月；南人學問，如牖中窺日”

Chu Jiye said to Sun Anguo: “The scholarship of the Northerners is profound and comprehensive, extensive and broad”. Sun replied: “The scholarship of the Southerners is clear and penetrating, concise and essential”. Upon hearing that, Zhi Daolin added: “The Sages and worthies are those who [are able to] forget the words [after sizing the Principles, so it is impossible to characterize them]. As to the men from the middle range on down, [we can say that] the reading of the Northerners is like viewing the moon in a bright place and the scholarship of the Southerners is like peering at the sun through a window”.<sup>609</sup>

Notwithstanding his openness to different theories and his extensive study of various scriptures (*viz.* the broadness of his learning), Daosheng remains a typical Southern scholar, and the style of his scholarship is no doubt a “peering at the sun through a window”. This approach is clearly represented in his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*, where the monk chooses to focus on specific points of interest and in commenting them puts forward some original conceptions which are coherent with his own underlying integral system of thought. This is the reason why in my exposition I will follow such orientation and proceed through presenting the key original conceptions presented by the exegete in his *Commentary*.

### 3.3.1 The conception of Buddha-nature (*Foxing* 佛性)

The cornerstone of Daosheng’s thought is the conception of Buddha Nature. This represented a reformulation of the True Characteristic (*shixiang* 實相, i.e. emptiness, as it was exposed in the *Prajñāpāramitā* and further explained in the Mādhyamika scholastic literature) in terms that better suited the believers’ personal practice towards the Buddhist goal.

The teaching of Emptiness had shown the ultimate unreality of all theories and mental constructions, including also core Buddhist conceptions like the *nirvāṇa*, the Noble Truths, the historical Buddha *etc.* However, it was not easy for practitioners to come to terms with such deep insight; they needed to be guided in more gradual and positive ways, and for this reasons during the twenties and thirties of the 5<sup>th</sup> century the doctrinal interests of the Chinese Buddhist mainstream turned from the *Prajñāpāramitā* to such doctrines as the *Nirvāṇa* and the Buddha-nature which focused on the mind and tried to describe the path leading to Enlightenment.

The Buddha-nature represented the possibility inherent in the beings to attain Buddhahood. The *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* explicitly associates it to the Tathāgatagarbha 如來藏 (Buddha-Embryo) and explains that it is because of the defilements that men are not aware of it:

「佛言：「善男子！我者即是如來藏義。一切眾生悉有佛性，即是我義。如是我義，從本已來，常為無量煩惱所覆，是故眾生不能得見。」《大般涅槃經》卷 7 〈如來性品 4〉 (CBETA, T12, no. 374, p. 407, b9–11)

The Buddha said: “O good man! ‘Self’ means ‘Tathāgatagarbha’ (Buddha-Embryo). Every being has Buddha-nature; this is the Self. Such Self has, from the very beginning, been under cover of innumerable defilements. That is why the beings cannot see it.

The fact that, as in the above quote, Tathāgatagarbha and Buddha-nature were often described as ‘Self’ made it very hard for the majority of the Chinese Buddhists to accept those ideas during the first stage of their introduction. In fact, thanks to Kumārajīva’s missionary activity they had just realized that the idea of an eternal self (variously called “spirit” 神, “cognitive spirit” 識神, “spiritual self” 神我) transmigrating incessantly from one life to the other (which was commonly even considered to be the core conception of Buddhist religion) was not in tune with the

<sup>609</sup> *Shishuo xinyu*, *Wenxue* 25 (cf. Yu Jiayi 1993, p. 189)

Buddhist doctrine. The slow conquest of such awareness has been well described by Sengrui in a famous passage of his *Preface to the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (406 AD)<sup>610</sup>.

In reality, the conception of Buddha-nature or “Self” as it was exposed in the *Nirvāṇasūtra* had nothing to do with the old concept of a spiritual, imperishable self; it was instead nothing more than a re-elaboration of *śūnyatā*: not only emptiness was the True Characteristic of all dharmas, at the same time it also embodied the supreme, imperishable and all-pervading truth of Buddhist doctrine and represented the Buddha himself in this world after his physical body had ceased to exist. Hence, to say that all beings were empty equaled to say that they all possessed in themselves the truth of Buddhist doctrine; this was the Buddha-Embryo and constituted the basis of Enlightenment, even though it was up to the beings to get rid of all defilements and bring it to light again. In spreading these new theories, the *Nirvāṇasūtra* itself claims to develop its tenets on the basis of the *Prajñāpāramitā* and in accord with it<sup>611</sup>.

From a historical point of view, we notice that there is no clear cut between the *Prajñāpāramitā* and Buddha-nature theories. In fact, the new teachings were known to some extent in China well before the introduction of the *Nirvāṇasūtra*. Huirui’s *Yuyi lun* 喻疑論 informs us that, when he was studying with Kumārajīva (this was a few years before the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* was introduced to China) its ideas had already started spreading also in Chang’an. At that time a text was circulating called *Dharmakāya sūtra* 法身經, which explained that the Dharma-body of the Buddha coincided with *nirvāṇa*, a view which perfectly matched with the new sūtras that were to be translated after the Kuchean master’s death<sup>612</sup>. When asked by Huirui whether it was correct to say that all beings, possessing a “True Nature” 真性, could become Buddha, Kumārajīva answered that:

《法華》‘開佛知見’，亦可皆有為佛性。若有佛性，復何為不得皆作佛耶？但此《法華》所明，明其唯有佛乘，無二無三；不明一切眾生，皆當作佛。皆當作佛。我未見之，亦不抑言無也。若得聞此正言，真是會其心府。故知聞之，必深信受。」

《出三藏記集》卷 5 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 42, a26-b2)

The expression ‘open the door of Buddha wisdom’<sup>613</sup> which is found in the *Lotus Sūtra* can also be understood as meaning that all [beings] are endowed with a Buddha-nature. Possessing a Buddha-nature, how would it be impossible for all of them to become Buddha?

<sup>610</sup> Cf. “In the sūtras that were first translated in this land [of China] the passages clearly explaining the empty nature of the “cognitive spirit” [transmigrating from life to life] were few, and the passages [asserting] that the spirit was preserved [and did not perish] were very numerous. *The Treatise on the Middle* and the *Hundred-Verses Treatise* had not yet been transmitted to this [land], and there was no comprehensive understanding [of those doctrines]. [Under such circumstances] who could correct [the erroneous views]? It is precisely for this reason that the former master (i.e. Dao’an) composed [many exegetical] works and pondered with much vigor on it, asking Maitreya to dissolve his doubts). 「此土先出諸經。於識神性空明言處少存神之文其處甚多。中百二論文未及此，又無通鑒，誰與正之。先匠所以輟章 (add variant 於) 遐慨，思決言於彌勒者，良在此也。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 59, a5-8)

<sup>611</sup> See as an example the following passage: “O good man! For example, a cow brings forth milk; the milk produces cream, the cream produces fresh butter, the fresh butter produces clarified butter, and the clarified butter produces *sarpirmanda* (scum of melted butter). *Sarpirmanda* is the best. When it is partaken of, all illnesses die away. All medicines are contained in this. O good man! It is the same with the Buddha. From the Buddha come about the twelve types of sūtra [scripture]. From the twelve types of sūtra there come about the sūtras [proper]. From the sūtras come about the *Vaipulya sūtras*. From the *Vaipulya sūtras* there arise the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and from the *Prajñāpāramitā* comes about the *Great Nirvāṇa*. The case is as that of *sarpirmanda*. Thus, *sarpirmanda* can well be likened to the Buddha-Nature. The Buddha-Nature is the Tathāgata” (translation from Yamamoto 1973, p. 195) 「善男子！佛亦如是，從佛出生十二部經，從十二部經出修多羅，從修多羅出方等經，從方等經出般若波羅蜜，從般若波羅蜜出大涅槃，猶如醍醐。言醍醐者，喻於佛性，佛性者即是如來。」《大般涅槃經》卷 14 〈聖行品 7〉 (CBETA, T12, no. 374, p. 449, a9-13)

<sup>612</sup> Cf. 「什公時，雖未有《大般泥洹》文。已有《法身經》明佛法身即是泥洹，與今所出若合符契。」《出三藏記集》卷 5 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 42, a16-18)

<sup>613</sup> This expression from the *Lotus Sūtra* was commonly regarded by later exegetes as an assertion certifying the existence of the Buddha-nature



However, this [sentence] from the *Lotus Sūtra* only states that there is only one Buddha-Vehicle, not two or three [different Vehicles]; it does not clearly say that all beings will become Buddha. Even though I haven't read this statement [in the scriptures] I couldn't say that there is no such conception. If I heard these true words I would rejoice in my heart and then know that what I heard deserves to be deeply trusted and accepted.

In the absence of authoritative textual evidence supporting these theories Kumārajīva preferred to keep a cautious attitude towards the new doctrines and did not openly engage in their discussion. Even though some vague allusions to the conception of Buddha-nature can be found in his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*<sup>614</sup>, Kumārajīva never addresses the topic, nor uses the term itself. In his *Commentary* Daosheng is instead much more explicit about it and in one important passage employs the term “Buddha-nature self” (*Foxing wo* 佛性我) counterposes it to a “saṃsāric self” (*shengsi zhong wo* 生死中我, i.e. the self which is caught in the saṃsāric cycle of death and rebirth). A comparison between the three different explanations of the same sūtra sentence as they are found in T1775 reveals the new, original perspective adopted by Daosheng:

「於我無我而不二，是無我義。

什曰。若去我而有無我，猶未免於我也。何以知之？凡言我，即主也。經云“有二十二根。二十二根亦即二十二主也”。雖云“無真宰”而有事用之主，是猶廢主而立主也。故於我無我而不二，乃無我耳。肇曰。小乘以封我為累。故尊於無我。無我既尊則於我為二。大乘是非齊旨。二者不殊，為無我義也。生曰。理既不從我為空，豈有我能制之哉？則無我矣。無我本無生死中我。非不有佛性我也。」《注維摩詰經》卷3〈弟子品3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 354, b18-27)

**Not to make any distinction between self and no-self: this is the meaning of no-self.**

**K:** If one gets rid of the self but still maintains [the concept of] no-self, he is still not free from the [idea of] self. How do I know that? When we say “self”, we mean “the host”. A sūtra says: “There are twenty-two senses. The twenty-two senses are the twenty-two hosts [of the body]”. Even though we say that there is no True Ruler [of the body], there is still a host using [these senses]: this is like discarding a host while establishing [another] one. So, “not to make distinctions between self and no-self” is the actual meaning of no-self.

**SZ:** The Hīnayāna regards enclosure in the self as a hindrance, hence they greatly value [the doctrine of] no-self. When no-self is valued, then a duality is generated [between] self and no-self. The Mahāyāna looks affirmation and negation as equal, [so that] the non-duality between [self and no-self] is the [the true meaning of] no-self.

**DS:** The Principle is not empty because of the self; in fact, how could there be a self which can condition the Principle? That is why there is no self; “no-self” basically means that there is no “saṃsāric self”, not that there is no “Buddha-nature self”.

As we can see, Kumārajīva's and Sengzhao's explanations of “no-self” are based upon the Mādhyamika rejection of all differences and discriminations; Daosheng refers instead to the Principle 理 (the Buddhist Truth) which is the only true reality and cannot be affected or altered in any way by any individual self, and it is on this basis that the idea of a “self” as an independent agent is wiped away. However, to be discarded is the “saṃsāric self”, not the “Buddha-nature self” which actually represents the Principle within the beings and constitutes the basis for their final Emancipation.

Later on, when commenting the *Nirvāṇasūtra*, Daosheng will become even more explicit about this “Buddha-nature self” and, following the sūtra's own terminology call it “True Self” (*zhen wo* 真我). For example, at a certain point the sūtra compares the Buddha nature to an adamant

<sup>614</sup> The most explicit one being perhaps the following one in which it is said that “in their stone-like ignorance [the beings] conceal the gold of [Buddha's] wisdom” (「眾生無明石中有智慧金。」《注維摩詰經》卷9〈菩薩行品11〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 406, c18-19)). Such metaphor is used also in the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* (Cf. Daban Niepan jing 大般涅槃經 [T375], Chapt. 23, p. 778, a24-28)

bead on a wrestler's brow. While fighting the bead goes into the wrestler's flesh and there is no knowing where it is; only a good doctor is able to understand what happened and reveal to the wrestler that the bead is still in his flesh. "The case is the same - the sūtra goes - with all beings. They do not come near to a good teacher of the Way. So, they cannot see the Buddha-nature which is within, even though they possess it"<sup>615</sup>. In a commentarial entry on a sentence of this passage Daosheng employs the term True Self and explains it as just another formulation of the absence of self:

「是時良醫尋問力士：“卿額上珠為何所在？”

案。道生曰。為說無我，即是表有真我也。」《大般涅槃經集解》卷 18〈如來性品 12〉 (CBETA, T37, no. 1763, p. 452, a26-27)

**Then, the good doctor asks the wrestler: “Where is that bead that was on your brow?”**

DS: [This passage] explains the absence of self, which [in turn] corresponds to affirming the existence of a True Self [which is symbolized by the bead]<sup>616</sup>.

### 3.3.2. Buddha as the Principle (*li* 理), or cosmic truth pervading the universe

In Daosheng's world view the Buddha coincides with the Buddhist Law (the Dharma), which is described as the Principle (*li* 理) pervading the whole universe. Only by realizing this universal truth the beings can get rid of all defilements and attain the Awakening. In his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* Daosheng clearly says that:

生曰。[...]佛為悟理之體[...]《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉

DS: The Buddha is the embodiment of the realization of the Principle.

生曰。[...]「如來身從實理中來。」《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 360, a1)

DS: The body of the Tathāgata is an emanation of the true Principle.

The *li* 理 represents a central concept of traditional Chinese philosophy. The character originally indicated the activity of “carving the jade” (*zhi yu* 治玉<sup>617</sup>), a very delicate work in which the artisan had to recognize the inner veins of the mineral and be able to move along them. Hence the term came to describe the inner conformation - or structure - of things, their proper inner order. When the *Zhuangzi* says in a famous apologue that cook Ding when butchering the oxen moves his knife along the “heavenly *li*” (*tian li* 天理)<sup>618</sup>, he means that his action follows the “natural conformation” of the animal's body, and that is why his movements meet with no resistance and the blade of his knife never gets blunt.

Everything under heaven is endowed with its own *li*, and from this plurality of “principles” a “supreme Principle” (*zhili* 至理) is inferred which encompasses all the others and represents the inner natural structure and dynamic of the whole universe. In *Zhuangzi* we already find expressions like “the Principle of the world” (*tiandi zhi li* 天地之理, *Chapt.* 17), “the Principle

<sup>615</sup> 「善男子！一切眾生亦復如是，不能親近善知識故，雖有佛性皆不能見，」《大般涅槃經》卷 7〈如來性品 4〉 (CBETA, T12, no. 374, p. 408, a24-25)

<sup>616</sup> See also the following important occurrence of the term: [“Also, O good man! As an example, there is a medicine in the Himalayas called ‘pleasing taste’. It tastes very sweet. It grows hidden under a deep growth of plants, and we cannot easily see it.] But from its scent, one can come to know the whereabouts of this medicine”. DS: [Here] the bodhisattva delivers the teaching of no-self. He expresses the Tathāgata's True Self and compares it to the scent that is smelled. [復次善男子！譬如雪山有一味藥，名曰樂味。其味極甜，在深叢下，人無能見] 有人聞香即知其地當有是藥。[...] 道生曰：菩薩說無我之教。表如來真我，譬聞香也。」《大般涅槃經集解》卷 19〈如來性品 12〉 (CBETA, T37, no. 1763, p. 453, b15-16)

<sup>617</sup> See *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字: “理，治玉也。从玉里聲。良止切”

<sup>618</sup> See *Zhuangzi*, *Chapt.* 3



of the myriad things” (*wanwu zhi li* 萬物之理; chapt. 17 and 33) and “the Great Principle” (*da li* 大理; chapt. 17) in which *li* already signifies the constant universal norm (or order) followed by all things in their evolution.

Such universal aspect of *li* 理 is further developed by the Xuanxue philosophers who on the one side intended it as a universal ordering principle and associated it to the Tao<sup>619</sup>, and on the other understood it as expressing the *wuwei* 無為 (“non-action”) approach adopted by the Sage when operating in the world<sup>620</sup>.

The adaptation of the concept of *li* 理 to the Buddhist philosophical *milieu* is certainly ascribable to Zhi Dun 支遁 (314 - 366) - a monk very familiar with the Xuanxue philosophical *milieu* - who greatly elaborated on it in his *Preface to a Selection of Compared Passages of the Larger and Lesser Prajñāpāramitā* 大小品對比要抄序. In his view, the *li* 理 expresses the supreme truth lying beyond words; still and unmoved beyond the changes of the phenomenal world, it yet includes in itself all possible changes<sup>621</sup>. Undefinable (it has “no name” 無名) and timeless (it has “no beginning” 無始) as it is, it ultimately coincides with “the substance of the Tao” (*dao zhi ti* 道之體).

On the basis of these previous elaborations Daosheng created his own conception of *li* and gave this term a meaning which was bound to become foundational in Chinese Buddhism and would even be further developed outside the Buddhist tradition in the cosmological speculations of the Neo-Confucian philosophers throughout the Song and Ming dynasties. Such complex elaboration is absent from Kumārajīva and Sengzhao’s writings (including the respective *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentaries*); the latter indeed used the word *li* 理 quite often in his works but apparently with the simple meaning of “principle of Emptiness”. Even though one can easily perceive the Taoist flavor implicit in such usage<sup>622</sup>, the monk never went further to transform it into a universal cosmic principle.

In the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* Daosheng calls *li* 理 the “Supreme Principle” (*zongji zhi li* 宗極之理) and coins the compound words “Buddha-principle” (*Fo li* 佛理) and “Dharma-Principle” (*fa li* 法理); in fact, representing the Buddhist Law, the Principle coincides with the

<sup>619</sup> See for example Wang Bi’s comment to *Laozi* 47: “Every occurrence has its source; everything has its master. [To borrow from the *Yijing*.] “The paths may be different, but they reach the same end; considerations may be many, but they all lead to one”. **The Way has its great constancy and the Principle has its general structure.** By holding fast to the way of old, one can master the present; through living in the present, one can know the beginning of antiquity. This is why [the Sage] knows without having to set foot outside his door or to look through his window”. 事有宗，而物有主，途雖殊而同歸也，慮雖百而其致一也。道有大常，理有大致。執古之道，可以御今，雖處於今，可以知古始，故不出戶，窺牖而可知也。For a discussion of the meaning of *li* 理 in Wang Bi’s writings see Chan 1991, pp. 52 - 57

<sup>620</sup> A good overview on the Xuanxue elaboration of the concept of *li* 理 is provided in Wang Xiaoyi 2011, vol. 2, pp. 281 - 289; on the “semantic Odyssey of *li*” see also Hurwitz 1968, pp. 247 - 248

<sup>621</sup> See as an example the following passages: “Non-being cannot be so by itself, the Principle cannot be so by itself. The “Principle” cannot be so by itself, hence the “Principle” is [just a name, it is] not Principle [in its substance]; “Non-being” cannot be so by itself, hence “Non-being” is [just a name, it is] not Non-being [in its substance]”. 「無不能自無，理亦不能為理。理不能為理，則理非理矣。無不能自無，則無非無矣。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 55, a20-22); “The Principle is without words [...] The Supreme Principle is [like] an obscure ravine (perhaps an allusion to the “Numinous valley” 神谷 of *Laozi* 6) and belongs to the sphere of no-name. No-name and no-beginning constitutes the substance [=true reality] of the Tao”. 「理無言也。[...]至理冥壑，歸乎無名。無名無始，道之體也。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 55, a27); “the Principle is not in the changes [of the phenomenal world], changes are not in the Principle; the teaching is not in the substance, substance is not in the teaching. Hence the infinite changes [of the phenomenal world] are external to the Principle. [...] So the delivery of the teaching arises from change (i.e. belongs to the phenomenal word), stagnation of the Principle generates from adaptability (=upāya, or teaching as suited to the occasion and hearer)”. 「理非乎變。變非乎理。教非乎體。體非乎教。故千變萬化，莫非理外。[...]故教遺與乎變。理滯生乎權。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 55, b22-24)

<sup>622</sup> Cf. my discussion in Baggio 2010, pp. 27 - 33

Buddha; describing the truth which is inherent in every particle of the universe, it can be specified as “Dharma-Principle”:

「**生**曰。佛理常在其心，念之便至矣。」《注維摩詰經》卷 6〈觀眾生品 7〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 389, a29）

DS: The Buddha-Principle is constantly in his heart/mind; he just needs to think of it and [all the Buddhas] will come [instruct him].

「**生**曰。夫有煩惱出於惑情耳。便應觀察法理以遣之也。[...]

《注維摩詰經》卷 6〈觀眾生品 7〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 386, a18-19）

DS: Afflictions arise from delusion. Hence one must scrutinize the Dharma-Principle in order to sweep them away.

The Principle is perfect and without defilements; impurity cannot be attributed to it, but only to the defiled perception of the beings. For this reason Daosheng’s soteriological perspective is ultimately based on a direct realization of the Principle which would reveal the ultimate unreality of the beings and their attachment *tout court*<sup>623</sup>:

「法無眾生，離眾生垢故。」

**生**曰：[...]眾生自出著者之情，非理之然也。情不從理，謂之垢也。若得見理，垢情必盡。以離垢驗之，知無眾生也。[...]

《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 345, c23-p. 346, a13）

**The Dharma is without sentient beings because it transcends the defilements of sentient beings** (MR, p. 86).

DS: [...] The perception that the beings have to free themselves from attachment is not imputable to the Principle. When perceptions do not follow the Principle, this is called “defilement”. If one obtains to see the Principle, the deluded perceptions will necessarily vanish. If one examines the problem after having removed the defilements, he will know that there are [actually] no beings [whatsoever]. [...]

「取我是垢。」

**生**曰。取我相者，不能廢己從理也。既取我相，見便轉也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 356, b4-5）

**To cling to the self is defilement**

DS: If one clings to the characteristics of the self, he will not be able to discard [the attachment to] oneself and follow the Principle. Clinging to the characteristics of the self, his [erroneous] views will increase.

The concept of *li* 理 is traditionally regarded by Chinese philosophers as being closely related to *xing* 性 (“[individual] nature”) to the point that the famous Eastern Han exegete Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 in one of his glosses to the *Book of Rites* had established a sort of equivalence between the two terms (*viz.* “The Principle corresponds to Nature” 理，猶性也<sup>624</sup>). The *Xici* section of the *Book of Changes* 易系辭上傳 also mentions a “supreme Principle of the world” (*tianxia zhili* 天下至理) and constructs the expression “to fully fathom the Principle and to exhaustively comprehend the nature [of things]” (*qiong li jin xing* 窮理盡性)<sup>625</sup> which also shows the close dialectical relation between the two concepts. This last expression came to be widely used by the Chinese Buddhists during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, including Kumārajīva’s disciples like

<sup>623</sup> A similar conception is found in Kumārajīva, cf. 唯優波離妄想是垢無妄想是淨 **生**曰。罪本無相而橫為生相。是為妄想。妄想自生垢耳。非理之咎也。（CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 356, a23-29）

<sup>624</sup> *Liji Zhengyi* 禮記正義, vol. 37 (quoted in Wang Xiaoyi 2011, vol. 2, p. 284)

<sup>625</sup> “窮理盡性，以至於命” 《易經·說卦》。

Sengrui<sup>626</sup> and Sengzhao<sup>627</sup> as signifying the understanding of the ultimate truth of the Buddhist religious path. Daosheng uses it too, but apparently charging it with a more specific and defined meaning; in fact, he seems to adapt it to his personal world view and intend *li* 理 as “the all-pervading universal Principle which is the Buddhist Law” and *xing* 性 as the “Buddha-nature inherent in all beings”. Hence in this case the whole expression could be translated as “to fully fathom the all-pervading universal Principle of the Buddhist Law and to exhaustively comprehend the Buddha-nature inherent in all beings”. See Daosheng’s usage of this expression in the following commentarial entry from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* which, as in the former one, puts a special emphasis on the soteriological implications of this realization:

維摩詰言：“說身無常，不說厭離於身”

「生曰。夫戀生者，是愛身情也。情既愛之，無有厭已。苟曰無常豈可愛戀哉。若能從悟，不期遣惑而惑自亡矣。亡乎惑者無復身也。雖已亡惑、無身，終不掇理。於理不掇，必能窮之。窮理盡性，勢歸兼濟。至於在惑之時，固應患惑求通。求通之懷，必以無常厭身，然則厭身出於在惑，非理中懷也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 374, c29-p. 375, a7)

**Vimalakīrti said, “Explain that the body is impermanent but do not teach that one should have aversion for one’s body” (MR, p. 110).**

DS: The craving for life is a feeling of attachment to the body. Once this feeling of attachment has arisen, there is no aversion for the self. But [as Vimalakīrti] introduces [the concept of] impermanence, how can such craving and attachment arise? If one can immediately realize [the truth], he does not need to wait for delusions to be driven away [because] they will vanish by themselves. Once delusions have vanished there is no more a “body”. Even though delusions have vanished and the body has proved to be inexistent, one should never cling to the Principle. Not clinging to it he will be able to fully fathom it. Having fully fathomed the [all-pervading universal] Principle and exhaustively comprehended the [Buddha-]nature [inherent in all beings], he will then address his force to helping [the others]. Indeed, when one resides in delusion he will accordingly try to find a way out, and this very attitude will lead him to have aversion for the body because of its impermanence. So, the aversion for the body arises from a state of delusion, it is not inherent in the Principle.

The interpretation of the expression *qiongli jinxing* 窮理盡性 formulated above is supported by another important passage of the *Commentary* in which Daosheng again links together *li* 理 and *xing* 性 in a similar expression that crystalizes the ultimate realization leading to deliverance:

「不斷煩惱而入涅槃，是宴坐。」

「生曰。既觀理得性，便應縛盡，泥洹。若必以泥洹為貴而欲取之。即復為泥洹所縛。[...]

《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈弟子品 3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 345, b5-13)

**Not to eradicate the afflictions yet enter into nirvāṇa—this is sitting in repose (MR, p. 85).**

DS: Once you have contemplated the Principle and grasped the [Buddha-]nature, hindrances will necessarily come to an end and [you will enter] nirvāṇa. But if you highly regard nirvāṇa and long to obtain it, then you will be hindered by [very idea of] nirvāṇa.

<sup>626</sup> See as an example his *Preface to the Lesser Prajñāpāramitā*: 「般若波羅蜜經者，窮理盡性之格言，菩薩成佛之弘軌也。」《小品般若波羅蜜經》卷 1 (CBETA, T8, no. 227, p. 536, c18-19)

<sup>627</sup> See for example the following passages from his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*: 「肇曰：[...]若能同彼六師，不見佛、不聞法。因其出家，隨其所墮而不以為異者，乃可取食也。此蓋窮理盡性，極無方之說也。善惡反論而不違其常，邪正同辯而不喪其真，斯可謂平等正化，莫二之道乎！」《注維摩詰經》卷 3〈弟子品 3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 350, c6-11); 「肇曰。佛者何也。蓋窮理盡性，大覺之稱也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈見阿闍佛品 12〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 410, a3-4)

### 3.3.3 The indivisibility of the Principle and Sudden Enlightenment (*dunwu* 頓悟)

The attainment of the truth represented by the Principle is variously called by Daosheng in his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* “to see the Principle” (*jian li* 見理), “to realize the Principle” (*wu li* 悟理), “to contemplate the Principle” (*guan li* 觀理), or “to scrutinize the Dharma-Principle” (*guancha falì* 觀察法理). This discovery is also described as “to realize the dharmas” (*ti fa* 體法), because (as it has been said above) the true essence of the dharmas *is* Buddha-nature:

[寂根菩薩曰：“佛、法、眾為二。”佛即是法 [法即是眾，是三寶皆無為相，與虛空等，一切法亦爾。能隨此行者，是為入不二法門]

生曰：以體法為佛。不可離法有佛也。若不離法有佛，(add variant 佛) 是法也。[...].」  
《注維摩詰經》卷 8 〈入不二法門品 9〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 398, b18-20)

[Serene Capacity Bodhisattva said, “Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha constitute dualities. The Buddha is the Dharma, [and the Dharma is the Sangha. These Three Jewels all [have] the characteristic of the unconditioned and are equivalent to space, and all dharmas are also likewise. To be able to practice accordingly is to enter the Dharma gate of non-duality.”] (MR, p. 146)

DS: Buddha is the realization of the dharma. The Buddha does not exist secluded from the dharma. Being so, then [as the sūtra says] “the Buddha is the dharma” [...]

The same conception will be later expressed by the monk also in the following passage of the *Collected Annotations on the Nirvāṇasūtra*:

「佛者即是佛性。何以故？一切諸佛以此為性。

案。道生曰。夫體法者，冥合自然。一切諸佛，莫不皆然。所以法為佛性也。」《大般涅槃經集解》卷 54 〈師子吼品 23〉 (CBETA, T37, no. 1763, p. 549, a28-b1)

**Buddha coincides with Buddha-nature. Why is it so? Because this is the nature of all Buddhas.**

DS: to realize the dharmas means to mystically merge with the spontaneity [of the universe].

All the Buddhas did so, and for this reason dharma coincides with Buddha-nature.

In his comments, Daosheng seems to make no distinction between the Dharma (intended as “Buddhist Doctrine”) and the dharmas (as “elements of reality”): the Doctrine is just like every other dharma constituting the world. As we can notice, rather than describing these dharmas as “empty” in the canonical Mādhyamika fashion, Daosheng sees them instead in positive terms as “recipients” of the universal truth. In his commentary to the *Nirvāṇasūtra* he better articulates this position and clearly says that:

「道生曰。法者，理實之名也。」《大般涅槃經集解》卷 54 〈師子吼品 23〉 (CBETA, T37, no. 1763, p. 549, a23)

DS: dharma is the term used for indicating the Reality [of the universe as it is represented by the] Principle.

案。道生曰。體法為佛。法即佛矣。」《大般涅槃經集解》卷 54 〈師子吼品 23〉 (CBETA, T37, no. 1763, p. 549, a26-27)

DS: The Buddha is to deeply realize the dharma. The dharma *is* the Buddha.

But how does the practitioner come to realize this truth permeating every particle of the universe as well as his inner self? Before Daosheng, it was commonly believed that this realization came at the seventh stage of the bodhisattva career, when “the forbearance of the non-arising” (*wushengfa ren* 無生法忍) was attained, wisdom was complete and “no new [karma] was to be generated” (*bu xin* 不新). This view was first held by Dao'an 道安 and Zhi Dun 支遁

(314 - 366)<sup>628</sup>, its first clear formulation being attributed to the latter<sup>629</sup>. This explanation was retrospectively called “minor sudden enlightenment” (*xiao dunwu* 小頓悟) in order to distinguish it from Daosheng’s new theory, which became known as “major sudden enlightenment” (*da dunwu* 大頓悟). The latter is described by Huida 慧達 (Southern Chen 南陳, 557 - 589) as follows:

「竺道生法師大頓悟云：夫稱 (read as 稱) “頓”者，明理不可分。“悟”語照極。以不二之悟，符 (read as 符) 不分之理。」《肇論疏》卷 1 (CBETA, X54, no. 866, p. 55, b6-8 // Z 2:1, p. 429, c10-12 // R96, p. 858, a10-12)

The Dharma master Daosheng’s theory of the “major sudden enlightenment” says: “‘sudden’ clarifies that the Principle is indivisible; ‘enlightenment’ means that the shining [of wisdom] has reached the utmost. [Then it is possible to] conform to the undivided Principle with one’s own non-dual comprehension”.

Given that the Buddhist truth coincides with the all-pervading Principle, the realization of it cannot be but a sudden comprehension which, according to Daosheng, takes place only after the tenth stage of the Bodhisattva career, when all the steps have already been traversed<sup>630</sup>. In fact, truth forms a unique and indivisible insight which cannot be separated into different components and does not admit different degrees of understanding. This idea, which certainly circulated in the Chinese Buddhist milieu even before Daosheng<sup>631</sup>, is clearly expressed in the following commentarial entry of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*:

「如優波離，以心相得解脫時，寧有垢不？」我言：「不也！」維摩詰言：“一切眾生心相無垢亦復如是”

生曰。眾生心相無垢。理不得異，但見與不見為殊耳。《注維摩詰經》卷 3 〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 356, a20-22)

**[‘Just so, Upāli, when one attains emancipation using the characteristics of the mind, is it (i.e., the mind) defiled or not?’ I said, ‘It is not.’] “Vimalakīrti said, ‘The characteristics of the minds of all sentient beings are likewise, in being without defilement (MR, p. 93).**

DS: The characteristics of the mind of all sentient beings are without defilement. The Principle [is only one and] cannot present differences, but there is indeed difference between seeing and not seeing it<sup>632</sup>.

<sup>628</sup> Speaking about “sudden enlightenment” (*dun wu* 頓悟), Liu Qiu 劉虬 (Southern Qi dynasty) says in his *Preface to the Wuliang yi jing* 無量義經序: 「尋得旨之匠，起自支、安。」《出三藏記集》卷 9 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 68, b28-29)

<sup>629</sup> In Liu Xiaobiao’s *Commentary to the Shishuo Xinyu* it is said that “the Biography of the dharma master Zhi [Dun] says: “The dharma master investigated the ten stages [of the bodhisattva career] and knew that sudden enlightenment occurred at the seventh [stage]” 《支法師傳》曰：法師研十地，則知頓悟於七住 (*Wenxue* 36; cf. Zhu Bilian 2013, vol. 1, p. 138).

<sup>630</sup> On the difference between major and minor enlightenment see the following important quote from Huijun’s 慧均 *Da sheng silun xuanyi* 大乘四論玄義: 「初地不知二地境界。乃至第十地不至 (=知?) 如來舉足下足也，亦是大頓悟家云：“至第十地，始見無生”。小頓悟家云：“至七地，始見無生也”。」《大乘四論玄義》卷 2 (CBETA, X46, no. 784, p. 568, a10-13 // Z 1:74, p. 13, b5-8 // R74, p. 25, b5-8)

<sup>631</sup> See for example the following passage of an anonymous *Preface to the Śūraṅgama Sūtra* preserved in *Chu sanzang jiji*: 「所以寂者，未可得而分也。故其篇云“悉遍諸國亦無所分”。而於法身不壞也。謂雖從感若流身充宇宙，豈有為之者哉！謂化者以不化為宗，作者以不作為主。為主其自忘焉。像可分哉。若至理之可分，斯非至極也。可分則有虧，斯成則有散。所謂為法身者，絕成虧、遺合散。靈鑒與玄風齊蹤。貞神與太陽俱暢。其明不分萬類殊觀，法身全濟，非亦宜乎！故曰“不分，無所壞也”。」《出三藏記集》卷 7 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 48, c26-p. 49, a5)

<sup>632</sup> See also the following comment preserved in the *Collected Annotations on the Nirvāṇasūtra*: “Daosheng said: ‘the True Principle is spontaneously so. ‘Enlightenment’ is to mystically merge with it. [The Principle] is ‘true’ and hence it presents no differences. How could then enlightenment include any variation? The unchangeable substance is a crystal-clear constant shining, but because of delusion [the beings] move away from it. 「道生曰。夫真理自然。



Differences arise because of the defiled minds of the beings. However, the Principle is one and its comprehension is a sudden realization. This conception is frequently underlined in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, to the point that the text can be considered one of the sources of Daosheng's theory of sudden enlightenment. See as an example the following quote:

「一念知一切法是道場，成一切智故。

生曰。一念無不知者，始乎大悟時也。[...]以直心為行初。義極一念知一切法。不亦是得佛之處乎！」《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 365, a6-21)

**To understand all the dharmas in a single moment of thought is the place of enlightenment, because of the accomplishment of omniscience** (MR, p. 100).

DS: In one instant there is nothing that is not known: this starts from the moment [in which one attains] the Great Enlightenment. [...] To rectify one's mind is the beginning of [Buddhist practice] which then culminates in the instant knowledge of all dharmas. Isn't this the Place of Enlightenment?

Since the true nature of the universe is constituted by the Buddha-nature, enlightenment cannot consist in negating this world of decay and seeking deliverance elsewhere but right in penetrating the true essence of saṃsāra. Since saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are one and without difference, instead of considering them two different dimensions one should focus on the Oneness that derives from the understanding of the teaching of non-duality. This non-dual approach to salvation - which is at the very heart of the Mādhyamika discourse - is developed in many passages of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* and - as we can see from his comments - is fully grasped and interiorized by Daosheng:

「於是維摩詰問文殊師利：「何等為如來種？」文殊師利言：「有身為種，」[...] 十不善道為種，以要言之，六十二見及一切煩惱皆是佛種。

生曰。夫大乘之悟，本不近捨生死，遠更求之也。斯為在生死事中，即用其實為悟矣。苟在其事而變其實為悟始者，豈非佛之萌芽起於生死事哉。其悟既長，其事必巧。不亦是種之義乎？所以始於有身，終至一切煩惱者，以明理轉扶疎至結大悟實也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 7〈佛道品 8〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 392, a15-23)

**[At this Vimalakīrti asked Mañjuśrī, "What is the seed of the Tathāgata?" Mañjuśrī said, "The possession of a body constitutes this seed..." The ten evil actions constitute this seed. In essence, the sixty-two mistaken views and all the afflictions constitute this seed"** (MR, p. 134)

DS: The Mahāyāna enlightenment does not consist in forsaking this saṃsāric existence and pursuing [the awakening] far away from it. [In fact, enlightenment] is found right within this saṃsāric existence, and this means that [such] awakening is reached by means of the reality [of saṃsāra]. If within the saṃsāric existence one transforms such reality into the beginning of enlightenment, isn't that a proof that the germination of the Buddha [which is within everyone] starts within the saṃsāric existence? When comprehension has grown deeper, then one's actions will surely become skillful. Isn't this the meaning of "[possessing the Tathāgata] seed"? So, [Mañjuśrī] starts [his exposition by saying that] "the possession of the body [constitutes the seed]" and ends it up [by saying that] "all the afflictions [constitute the seed]": this is in order to illustrate how [the understanding of the] Principle can increasingly flourish, and eventually generate the fruit of the Great Enlightenment.

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悟亦冥符。真則無差，悟豈容易？不易之體，為湛然常照。但從迷乖之[...]」《大般涅槃經集解》卷 1 (CBETA, T37, no. 1763, p. 377, b10-12)



「爾時維摩詰謂眾菩薩言：“諸仁者，云何菩薩入不二法門？”

生曰。既悟其一，則眾事皆得。故一為眾事之所由也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 8〈入不二法門品 9〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775)

At that time Vimalakīrti said to the congregation of bodhisattvas, “Sirs, how does the bodhisattva enter the Dharma gate of non-duality?” (MR, p. 143)

DS: Once you have comprehended Oneness, all the other goals are achieved. Hence Oneness is what all the other goals depend upon.

Even though enlightenment is a sudden realization of the true nature of this very world, the progression leading to it cannot be without stages and without differences. For this reason Daosheng, even considering the *Nirvāṇasūtra* as the ultimate teaching<sup>633</sup>, clearly recognizes the importance of all the other scriptures and of all teachings and upāya used in order to respond to the specific needs of the beings and lead them to salvation. This is probably the main reason why in his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* the monk - unlike Kumārajīva and Sengzhao - never emphasizes the clear anti-Hīnayāna bias of the sutra; indeed he points out that only the *bodhisattvayāna* (*pusa dao* 菩薩道) can lead to the supreme complete enlightenment which equals the Buddha's one<sup>634</sup>, but also recognizes how “the three vehicles all have enlightenment as their ideal”<sup>635</sup>.

The idea of a gradual progression leading to sudden enlightenment is better articulated by Daosheng in the following passage of his *Lotus Sūtra Commentary*:

「何以漸漸變耶？所以爾者，欲表理不可頓階，必要研羶以至精。損之又損之，以至於無損矣。」《法華經疏》卷 2 (CBETA, X27, no. 577, p. 13, b6-7 // Z 2B:23, p. 412, c16-17 // R150, p. 824, a16-17)

Why should one change little by little? The reason [for saying so] is to explain that the Principle cannot be “climbed up” all of a sudden. It is necessary to examine the rough in order to reach the subtle, to decrease little by little until getting to the stage in which nothing more can be taken off.

Daosheng's understanding of the “mechanism of enlightenment” basically relies on the discussion of the topic undertaken in the *Nirvāṇasūtra*. This scripture explains that the causes of enlightenment are of two kinds, *i.e.* the “right cause” (*zheng yin* 正因) which is identified with the Buddha-nature, and the “[supporting] conditions” (*yuan yin* 緣因) which represent the personal strive and commitment enabling the beings to attain the Ultimate. If the right cause is forever clear and evident, nonetheless the beings need to work hard and progressively prepare the necessary “[supporting] conditions”:

<sup>633</sup> As to Daosheng's understanding of the different turnings of the dharma wheel, see the following passage from his *Lotus sūtra Commentary*: 「妙法。夫至像無形。至音無聲。希微絕朕思之境。豈有形言者哉。所以殊經異唱者，理豈然乎？寔由蒼生機感不一，啟悟萬端。是以大聖示有分流之疏，顯以參差之教。始於道樹，終于泥曰 (read as 洎)。凡說四種法輪：

一者善淨法輪。謂始說一善。乃至四空。令去三塗之穢。故謂之淨；

二者方便法輪。謂以無漏道品。得二涅槃。謂之方便；

三者真實法輪。謂破三之偽。成一之美。謂之真實；

四者無餘法輪。斯則會歸之談。乃說常住妙旨。謂無餘也。」《法華經疏》卷 1 (CBETA, X27, no. 577, p. 1, b16-24 // Z 2B:23, p. 400, d10-18 // R150, p. 800, b10-18)

<sup>634</sup> Cf. as an example 「生曰。阿耨多羅者，無上也。三藐三者，正遍也。菩提者，彼語有之，此無名也。實則體極。居終智慧也。然有三品：聲聞也、辟支佛也、佛也。二乘各於其道為菩提耳，非所謂菩提也。唯佛菩提為無上正遍菩提也。[...]」《注維摩詰經》卷 4〈菩薩品 4〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 361, a8-14)；

「生云。雖曰“總攝賢聖智慧”，而二乘不盡其理。唯是菩薩所行之道而已。」《注維摩詰經》卷 10〈法供養品 13〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 416, a17-19)

<sup>635</sup> 「生曰。三乘皆同以其理為悟 [...]」《注維摩詰經》卷 10〈法供養品 13〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 416, a14-15)

「眾生佛性不名為“佛”，以諸功德因緣和合，得見佛性，然後得佛。汝言“眾生悉有佛性，何故不見者？”是義不然，何以故？以諸因緣未和合故。善男子！以是義故，我說二因，正因、緣因。正因者，名為“佛性”，緣因者，發菩提心。以二因緣，得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提，如石出金。」《大般涅槃經》卷 28〈師子吼菩薩品 11〉(CBETA, T12, no. 374, p. 533, a29-b6)

The Buddha-nature of beings cannot be called “Buddha” *tout court*. Due to the interaction of the causes and conditions [influenced by one’s] merits one obtains to see the Buddha-Nature, and only then he achieves [the status of] Buddha. You say: “All beings are endowed with a Buddha-nature, then why is it that this is not visible?” [Such] approach is incorrect. Why? It is because causes and conditions are not yet in conjunction [that you cannot see the Buddha-nature]. O good man! For this reason, I spoke about two causes: the right cause (*zhengyin* 正因) and the [supporting] condition (*yuanyin* 緣因). The right cause is the Buddha-nature 佛性, and the condition is the mind that aspires to Bodhi. Because of these two causes one attains supreme, complete enlightenment (*skr. anuttarā samyakṣambodhi*), as in the case of a stone from which gold comes forth.

The importance of the “condition” factor in the attainment of enlightenment probably formed the main content of one of Daosheng’s lost treatise whose title (*Ying you yuan lun* 應有緣論) can be tentatively read as [*Buddha’s*] *response to the beings is based on conditions (i.e. on the efforts of the beings themselves)*.

### 3.3.4 Discussion of the bodies of the Buddha

As pointed out above (cf. pp. 94 - 97), the Mahāyāna theory of the different bodies of the Buddha was the result of a slow process of evolution; while it was already quite developed in *Da zhidu lun*, the related materials found in such work still presented contradictions and inconsistencies which contributed to raise many questions among the learned Buddhist monks of the early 5<sup>th</sup> century: what was the nature of each of the Buddha’s bodies? What was the relation between them? And - a particularly crucial point for all believers - in which ways did the absolute body of the Buddha (*dharmakāya*) epitomizing the universal Buddhist truth interact with the beings in the world for converting and guiding them towards the ultimate realization? Besides the difficulty of coherently explaining all these issues, as the epistles exchanged between Kumārajīva and Huiyuan on the topic (cf. T1856) demonstrate the cultural differences between India and China (in particular, the great divergence of the respective argumentative methods) greatly contributed to generate even greater confusion on the subject.

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, including some important passages discussing the bodies of the Buddha, no doubt played a role in stimulating the Chinese Buddhists’ reflections on the topic. Kumārajīva and Sengzhao’s comments on this doctrine have already been dealt with above; here I will focus on Daosheng’s discussion of it.

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* strongly denies the existence of a physical body of the Buddha; in particular, the first part of *Chapt. 12 (Vision of Akṣobhya Buddha)* is entirely devoted to the rejection of such conception. Elaborating on those passages Daosheng discussed even more in detail this philosophical position. For example, when the sūtra text says that “[the Tathāgata] **does not arise from the four great elements and is identical to space**” (MR, p. 165)<sup>636</sup>, he comments that “the Buddha definitely hasn’t a human-like existence. If that were the case, he would be constituted by the Four Elements, hence he would be a mortal being. But the Buddha is not mortal. He manifests himself as a response [to the solicitation of the beings], but he is

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<sup>636</sup> 「非四大起同於虛空。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈見阿閼佛品 12〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 410, b16)

actually constantly inexistent”<sup>637</sup>. When the sūtra says “[the Tathāgata] has no accumulation of the six sensory capacities” (MR, p. 165)<sup>638</sup>, he explains that “if Buddha existed as a physical person, he should arise from the accumulation of the six sensory capacities. But since he has no accumulation [of these capacities], how could he possibly exist as a physical person? [...]”<sup>639</sup>.

In other cases Daosheng confutes the existence of a human-like Buddha by resorting to the Mādhyamika logical methods of *reduction ad absurdum* of all the possible options implied by such existence. When the sūtra text relates Vimalakīrti’s words that “when I view the Tathāgata, he does not come in the past, does not go in the future, and does not abide in the present” (MR, p. 165)<sup>640</sup>, Daosheng constructs the following argumentation aiming at logically proving the inexistence of a human-like Buddha in the three times:

生曰。若以“見佛”為見者，此理本無。佛又不見也；不見有佛乃為見佛耳。見佛者見此人為佛，從未來至現在，從現在入過去。故推不見三世有佛也。1. 過去若有，便應更來。然其不來，明知佛不在過去矣。2. 未來若有，便應即去。然其不去，明知佛不在未來矣。3. 現在若有，便應有住，然其不住，明知佛不在現在矣。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈見阿閼佛品 12〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 410, a18-26)

DS: If [the statement] “to see the Tathāgata” is intended as meaning “[to actually] see [the Buddha as a person]”, then there is no such principle. Moreover, the Buddha is not [something that can be actually] seen, and not to see the existence of the Buddha means to actually view him. If “to see the Buddha” meant to see the Buddha as a person, [then] from the future he should arrive in the present, and from the present he should enter the past. [But since it is not like that] we can infer that in the three times no Buddha is seen. 1. If [the Buddha] existed in the past, he should come again [in this world]; but he does not come, so it is clear that he does not reside in the past. 2. If he existed in the future, he should also depart from it [and arrive in the present]; but he does not depart, so it is clear that he does not reside in the future. 3. If he existed in the present, he should abide [in the present and not depart]; but he does not abide, so it is clear that the Buddha does not exist in the present.

In the same chapter another logical argumentation is used in order to prove the inexistence of the physical body of the Buddha. In this case a set of five alternatives representing all possible relations between “matter” and “the Buddha” are analyzed and eventually discarded; this is but a reformulation of the analysis undertaken in *Da zhidu lun* proving the statement that “the Tathāgata cannot be found”<sup>641</sup>. The sūtra text states “I neither view [the Tathāgata,] as form, nor view him as the suchness of form, nor view him as the nature of form. I neither view him as feeling, conception, process, or consciousness; nor view him as the suchness of consciousness; nor view him as the nature of consciousness” (MR, p. 165)<sup>642</sup>. Daosheng’s comment reads as follows:

<sup>637</sup> 「佛者竟無人佛也。若有人佛者。便應從四大起而有也。夫從四大起而有者。是生死人也。佛不然矣。於應為有，佛常無也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈見阿閼佛品 12〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 410, b18-21)

<sup>638</sup> 「六入無積。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈見阿閼佛品 12〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 410, b22)

<sup>639</sup> 「生曰。夫有人佛者，要從六入積而或出也。既無有積，夫有人佛乎？[...]」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈見阿閼佛品 12〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 410, b22-24)

<sup>640</sup> 「我觀如來，前際不來，後際不去，今則不住。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈見阿閼佛品 12〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 410, a18)

<sup>641</sup> 「如來不可得」《大智度論》卷 55〈散華品 29〉(CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 454, c18). The five alternatives exposed in *Da zhidu lun*, which are subsequently discussed at length one by one, are the following 「1. 是五眾非如來，2. 離五眾非如來，3. 五眾不在如來中，4. 如來不在五眾中，5. 如來亦不有五眾。」《大智度論》卷 55〈散華品 29〉(CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 454, c18-20)

<sup>642</sup> 「不觀色，不觀色如，不觀色性，不觀受、想、行、識，不觀識如，不觀識性。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9〈見阿閼佛品 12〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 410, a27-28)

生曰。[...]人佛者五陰合成耳。若有便應色即是佛。若色不即是佛。便應色外有佛也。色外有佛又有三種：佛在色中、色在佛中、色屬佛也。1. 若色即是佛。不應待四也。2. 若色外有佛。不應待色也。3. 若色中有佛，佛無常矣。4. 若佛中有色，佛有分矣。5. 若色屬佛色，不可變矣。[...]既無所見乃為見實也。以實見為佛。見實，所以見佛也。《注維摩詰經》卷9〈見阿閼佛品12〉

DS: [...] A physical [body of the] Buddha would have generated from the union of the Five *skandhas*; if [such a body] existed, then matter would coincide with the Buddha. [Instead,] if matter did not coincide with the Buddha, then this should exist outside matter, and [in this case] three more possibilities would be given, viz. the Buddha exists within the matter; matter exists within the Buddha; matter belongs to [the same nature of the] Buddha.

[All the five positions mentioned above are false, because:] 1. If matter coincided with the Buddha, then [such matter] shouldn't depend on the Four [Elements]; 2. If Buddha existed outside of matter, then he wouldn't need to rely on matter; 3. If the Buddha existed within matter, then he wouldn't be ever-existing; 4. If matter existed within the Buddha then he would be made of different components; 5. If matter belonged to [the same nature of] the Buddha, then [matter] wouldn't be subjected to change.

[...] Since the fact that there is no [Buddha] that can be seen means to [actually] view reality, this vision of reality *is* the Buddha. If one views reality, then he views the Buddha.

We know from the sources that Daosheng composed a treatise entitled *The Dharma-body is not made of matter* (*Fashen wu se lun* 法身無色論). The material included in the above quote seems directly related to this lost work and perhaps constituted a part of its content.

The existence of a physical body of the Buddha is strongly rejected, as his only reality is the Dharma-body. Under this perspective, the Buddha's presence in the world is nothing but an illusionary “transformation body” (*huashen* 化身) generated as a sort of automatic response to the “call” of the beings in need. The features of the Dharma-body and its modes of interaction with the beings for the purpose of their salvation are described in a precious entry of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*:

「佛身者即法身也。

生曰。夫“佛身”者，丈六體也。丈六體者，從法身出也。以從出名之，故曰“即法身”也。“法”者，無非法義也。“無非法義”者，即無相實也。身者，此義之體。法身真實，丈六應假。將何以明之哉？悟夫法者，封惑永盡，髣髴亦除。妙絕三界之表，理冥無形之境。形既已無故能無不形。三界既絕，故能無不界。無不[8]形者，唯感是應。佛無為也。至於形之巨細、壽之脩短，皆是接眾生之影迹，非佛實也。眾生若無感，則不現矣，非佛不欲接。眾生不致，故自絕耳。若不致而為現者，未之有也。譬日之麗天而影在眾器，萬[10]影萬形皆是器之所取。豈日為乎？器若無水則不現矣，非不欲現器不致故自絕耳。然則丈六之與八尺，皆是眾生心水中佛也。佛常無形，豈有二哉？[...]《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 343, a2-b5)

#### **The body of the Buddha is the Dharma-body.**

DS: “The body of the Buddha” is the sixteen feet body<sup>643</sup> which is emanated from the Dharma-body. Naming it after its source, [the text] hence calls it “identical to the Dharma-body”. “Dharma” means that there is nothing that is not dharma (i.e. dharma indicates the whole reality) and this indicates in turn that [, since all dharmas are empty, the Dharma-body] is a reality without characteristics.

The [Dharma-]body is the embodiment of this truth. The Dharma-body is real, [whereas] the sixteen feet [body] is just an illusory responsive [appearance]. How can I clarify that? Having [the Buddha] realized the dharma, the delusions obstructing [his mind] are forever eliminated, every little trace of them being also eradicated; he marvelously transcends the Triple World and

<sup>643</sup> Zhangliu 丈六 Sixteen “feet”, the normal height of a Buddha in his “transformation body” (*huashen* 化身; Skr. *nirmāṇa-kāya*); said to be the height of the Buddha when he was on earth (Soothill 2010).

merges with the Principle in the sphere of no-form. Since he has no more form, he can take any form; since he has transcended the Triple World he can appear in any world. Being able to take any form, he [manifests himself] just as a response to the solicitations [of the beings], while remaining actually inactive. As to the size and longevity of his [responsive] appearance, [each time] they [change for] meeting with [the specific needs of] the concrete beings; [however] they do not represent the Buddha in his real aspect. If the beings do not solicit [the Buddha], he does not manifest himself; [and] this does not mean that the Buddha does not want to meet the beings, it is just that since the beings do not call upon him, he spontaneously fades. The Buddha never manifests himself without being called upon; it is like when the sun shines in the sky and is reflected in the water held in many different containers: these reflections are received *by the containers*, what does this have to do with the sun? If there is no water inside the containers, [the sun] produces no reflection. It is not that the sun does not want to be reflected, but since the containers do not “call upon” him, he does not come in contact with them. So the Six feet body or the Eight feet body [of the Buddha] are just reflections of the Buddha in the hearts of the beings. The Buddha is [actually] constantly without form, let alone with possessing even [those] two [different] shapes!

As we can see, the conclusive simile wonderfully describes Daosheng’s peculiar understanding of the process through which the beings can obtain salvation; this perfectly matches with the explanation of the *Nirvāṇasūtra* quoted above: the Buddha-nature which is the “true cause” (*zhengyin* 正因) of enlightenment corresponds to the shining sun, and the effort of the beings which is called “[supporting] condition” (*yuanyin* 緣因) is represented by the water held in the containers making it possible for them to “receive” the light.

Such positive description of the process of enlightenment (the Tathāgata is by no means portrayed as pure emptiness, but instead as an all-pervading universal truth) is not found in Kumārajīva and Sengzhao’s commentaries and constitutes a particular feature of Daosheng’s exegesis.

Not only the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* strongly rejected the existence of a human-like Buddha, but it also denied the true existence of a Pure Land (*jingtu* 淨土) as a sort of wonderful paradise acquired through the accumulation of innumerable meritorious deeds where the beings can lead a comfortable existence enjoying the proximity of the local Buddha. The sūtra makes it clear that the creation of a Pure Land is strictly related to the bodhisattva’s activity of conversion of the beings; moreover, while the purity of those countries is evident to those who are endowed with a pure mind, this can’t be seen by the beings having a defiled perception<sup>644</sup>. The scripture explains that:

Bodhisattvas acquire the buddha lands according to the sentient beings they convert. [...] Bodhisattvas’ acquisition of the pure countries is entirely for the benefit of sentient beings. It is like a man who wants to build a palace on empty land who is [able to build it] according to his wish without hindrance. He would never be able to build it in space. Bodhisattvas are like this. In order to accomplish the [salvation of] sentient beings, they vow to acquire the Buddha countries. The vow to acquire a buddha land is not done in empty space! [...] [The Buddha said], “Śāriputra, it is through the transgressions of sentient beings that they do not see the purity of the Tathāgata’s (i.e., my) Buddha land. This is not the Tathāgata’s fault! Śāriputra, this land of mine is pure, but you do not see it.” (MR, pp. 75 - 78)

Such explanation evidences the purely functional value of the Pure Lands of the Buddha and maintains the supremacy of the ultimate emancipation over the accumulation of merits through a moral exercise *per se* aiming exclusively at obtaining as a reward the improvement of one’s life conditions.

<sup>644</sup> The topic of the Pure Land is discussed particularly in the last part of *Chapt. 1*, which is entitled *Buddha Land*.



Daosheng's lost treatise entitled *Fo wu jingtu lun* (*The Buddha has no Pure Land*) 佛無淨土論 was probably inspired by this sūtra and his annotations on this subject preserved in T1775 might well reflect its content. Daosheng clearly points out the centrality of the soteriological concern, and from this absolute point of view sees the “purity” (*jing* 淨) of the Buddha land not as the opposite of “defilement” (*gou* 垢), but instead as the “inexistence [of differences *tout court*]”, and hence as the ultimate Buddhist truth<sup>645</sup>. Let us examine his own formulation:

「所以者何？菩薩隨所化眾生而取佛土。

生曰。夫國土者，是眾生封疆之域。其中無穢，謂之為淨；無穢為無，封疆為有。有生於惑，無生於解。其解若成，其惑方盡。[...]既云“取彼”，非自造之謂。若自造則無所統，無有眾生，何所成就哉。」《注維摩詰經》卷 1〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 334, c3-21)

**Why is this? Bodhisattvas acquire the buddha lands according to the sentient beings they convert** (MR, p. 75).

DS: The [Buddha] country's land is the territory (the sphere) where beings are enclosed. Since there is no defilement in it, it is called “Pure”. Being without defilement it represents non-existence (i.e. non-differentiation); enclosing the beings it represents existence. Existence arises from delusion, whereas non-existence arises from understanding. If one achieves complete understanding, all delusions will come to an end. [...] The sūtra says that “[the bodhisattvas] obtain that [country]” and this means that they do not create it by themselves. [In fact,] if they had created it, how could they “conquer” it? And without the beings, what achievement could they possibly earn?

From the view that “the Buddha has no Pure Land” Daosheng derived another important doctrinal tenet which caused much sensation in his times, *i.e.* that “good actions have no [karmic] reward” (*shan bu shou bao* 善不受報). In Daosheng's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* we find some comments that are related to such topic; all of them stress the fact that all deeds and practices should be performed without attachment, this being the only way not to generate new karma (no matter if good or bad) that would further bind to the saṃsāric existence. For example, when the sūtra explains that “**a desirous attachment to the flavor of meditation is the bond of bodhisattvas**” (MR, p. 112)<sup>646</sup>, Daosheng comments that “when one practices meditation with the aim of receiving [a positive] retribution, one then has attachment to the practice. Having attachment to the practice, one's retribution will be delusory. One who is deluded in retribution is tied to birth [-and-death]”<sup>647</sup>. This “retribution that is actually delusory” is instead not received by the bodhisattva, because “when [a bodhisattva], in the hope of saving other lives, is born [into this world of suffering], he is being born as an expedient means. Because he is not motivated for his own sake, his retribution is without delusion”<sup>648</sup>. The topic of karmic reward binding the inexperienced practitioner to the Triple World is explained in more general and comprehensive terms in the passage below:

生曰。慧亦二種：一為觀理伏心；二為於觀結盡。觀理伏心者，三乘所同，偏執，則縛在小（read as 生）也。若以為化方便，用之則不縛矣。行功致果者，有結，便受三界之

<sup>645</sup> Such discussion of the Pure lands of the Buddha sharply contrasts with the pietistic approach that was cultivated in the Buddhist community at Lushan. We know for example that in 402 Huiyuan with a group of monks and laymen made the vow to be reborn in Sukhāvatī, the Western paradise where Buddha Amitābha resided (cf. *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], p. 109, c14-16; see also Zürcher 2007, p. 219)

<sup>646</sup> 「貪著禪味是菩薩縛。」《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 378, c4)

<sup>647</sup> 生曰。貪報行禪，則有味於行矣。既於行有味，報必惑焉。夫惑報者，縛在生矣。」《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 378, c4-8)

<sup>648</sup> 生曰。欲濟群生而生者為方便生也。以本不為己故報無惑焉。」《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 378, c9-12)



報，則縛在生也。若得結盡之慧，則解矣。」《注維摩詰經》卷 5〈文殊師利問疾品 5〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 378, c13-23)

DS: Wisdom is of two kinds. The first [consists in] subduing one's mind by contemplating the Principle; the second [is to] extinguish the bonds in such contemplation. As to the first kind, this is shared by all the three vehicles; [however,] when one has a biased attachment [to the practice] he will be tied to life [and-death]. If he considers [the practice] as a skillful means to convert [the beings], then he could use it without generating bonds.

When one practices merits in order to obtain a compensation, then he will create bonds and receive the karmic reward in the Triple World; hence he will be tied to life [and-death]. [Instead,] if one obtains the wisdom that extinguishes the bonds he will find deliverance.

### 3.4 Interlinear commentary or Exposition of meaning commentary?

Daosheng's commentary is no doubt the hardest to assess in terms of format. On the one side, it shows a much weaker connection to Kumārajīva's one: unlike Sengzhao, he rarely reproduces or rephrases its comments; moreover, we do not find in it the linguistic and ethnological concern characterizing Kumārajīva's exegesis, nor the wide range of exegetical devices displayed by the Kuchean master (apologues, metaphors, etc.). The author focuses almost exclusively on philosophical themes, and his explanations are not limited to the Mādhyamika approach (as it is the case for Sengzhao). On the other side, Daosheng's approach to the text is less structured than Sengzhao's one; in fact, while the latter relies on a precise exegetical framework which is made explicit in his *Preface* (i.e. the "inconceivable" as central message of the sūtra, further articulating into a fundamental aspect and various outward manifestations), the former seems to proceed more freely and choose each time on which passages to focus his attention. The parallel prose is used by Daosheng only occasionally and does not constitute the backbone of his philosophical argumentation.

When reading the three commentaries synoptically, the reader is immediately stricken by the originality of Daosheng's philosophical vocabulary: the use of terms like "Buddha nature" (*foxing* 佛性), "Buddha principle" (*foli* 佛理) etc. and the philosophical elaboration on them is not found in the other two commentaries and clearly anticipates philosophical interests which would dominate the Buddhist debate starting from the mid-fifth century. In the commentary these innovative discussions are alternated with fairly Mādhyamika argumentations, giving the impression of a "work in progress" in which that author is still trying to find a synthesis between theories exposed in different scriptures and seemingly conflictive philosophical approaches (namely the apophatic methods of Mādhyamika and the more cataphatic stand of Buddha-nature theories) and transform it into a coherent personal religious world-view.

The view has been put forward by Wang Jianjun<sup>649</sup> that in his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* Daosheng focused on commenting upon specific points on which Sengzhao's explanation was deficient or absent. Allegedly, such claim would find a confirmation in the passage in *Chu sanzang jiji* explaining that "the śramaṇa from Chang'an Sengzhao first commented the *Vimalakīrti[nirdeśa]* and all his contemporaries carefully studied [the text]. Then [Dao]sheng further disclosed the deep meaning [of that sūtra] clearly exposing a new, original [interpretation of it]." <sup>650</sup>

This is a quite interesting hypothesis. However, judging from a synoptic reading of Sengzhao and Daosheng's annotations I would be more cautious on this regard and confine myself to affirm that Daosheng had different philosophical interests than Sengzhao and hence often elaborated on points upon which Sengzhao did not comment at length. Whether his intention was to fill the "exegetical gaps" left by Sengzhao and further complete his commentary seems to me rather hard to prove. Moreover, the above passage from *Chu sanzang jiji* does not explicitly state

<sup>649</sup> See Wang Jianjun 2011, p. 25

<sup>650</sup> 「關中沙門僧肇始注維摩，世咸翫味。及生更發深旨，顯暢新異。」《出三藏記集》卷 15 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 111, b3-4).

that Daosheng further perfected Sengzhao's commentary, and Wang's interpretation of it seems to me quite forced.

The fact that Daosheng's commentary is less connected to and less dependent on Kumārajīva's annotations and its focus on specific points of interest (like the Buddha lands, the *dharmakāya* etc.) which are elaborated at some length has led Kudō Masaya<sup>651</sup> to formulate the hypothesis that before being assembled into T1775 the materials of Daosheng's commentary constituted a commentary of the expository type (*yishu* 義疏).

Besides the fact that Daosheng's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* is described precisely as a *yishu* work by Sengyou in *Chu sanzang jiji*<sup>652</sup>, there are indeed good reasons for making such hypothesis. I will briefly point out four main ones:

### 1. Personal reasons

From the above discussion of Daosheng's personality and approach to the scriptures it emerged how the peculiarity of his exegetical style was to "grasp the essence [of the doctrine or a text]" (*tong qing* 通情)<sup>653</sup>; this was achieved by *seeing through* the text rather than holding fast to single words and expressions. There is no doubt that the *yishu* format particularly suited such approach, allowing the exegete to fix his attention on some key points of interest and avoid a word by word time-consuming explanation.

### 2. Practical reasons

As it has been said above, the interlinear commentarial format entailed the reproduction of the sūtra text in its entirety. That would have been a troublesome task for the exegete, also considering the increasing length of the Buddhist scriptures imported from the Western Regions. Interlinear commentaries originated from the translation activity; and these works were most naturally interwoven with the translated text, to the point that the two almost resembled to the warp and weft of the same texture. However, when exegesis "divorced" from translation, the reproduction of the entire text to which a new commentary had to be appended became a practical inconvenience. It was also for this reason that new and more agile "exegetical formats" started to be experimented, making the expository commentary suddenly enjoy great popularity and diffusion.

Daosheng's commentary was certainly not entirely composed in Chang'an while the translation of the text was been undertaken (probably at that time he jotted down some annotations which were revised and deeply re-elaborated in the following years). As far as we know, while in Chang'an Daosheng did not serve as assistant or scribe in the translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* or any other sūtra<sup>654</sup>. Maybe this is the reason why he did not develop any particular interest for lexicography and more in general for the analysis of the Sanskrit terms and the search for viable Chinese equivalents. His concern was instead directed towards more philosophical themes that would be better discussed through a *yishu*-type commentary.

### 3. Historical reasons

Kumārajīva's age represents a turning point in Chinese Buddhist history. Thanks to more accurate translations and oral explanations directly delivered by the Kuchean master, the Chinese

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<sup>651</sup> See Kudō Masaya 2000 (a)

<sup>652</sup> 「維摩、法華、泥洹、小品諸經義疏，世皆寶焉。」《出三藏記集》卷 15 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 111, b5-6)

<sup>653</sup> Cf. 「通情，則生、融上首」《高僧傳》卷 7 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 368, b12)

<sup>654</sup> We find instead some evidence of Daosheng's involvement in the actual translation work after his return to Jianye. In fact, his name is listed along with Buddhajīva 佛陀什 as the translator of the *Mahīśāsakavinaya* 彌沙塞部五分律 [T1421]; the Chinese version of this text was produced in 423 at the Longguang Temple of Jianye. Kim has pointed out that "it is not certain how much and in what way Daosheng as a co-translator participated in the translation process, but it is very rare for a Chinese to share the position with a native speaker of Sanskrit". (Kim 1990, p. 57)

had acquired a solid foundational knowledge of Buddhism and the Indian religious world in which it arose and developed (the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* accompanied by Kumārajīva's explanations is an eminent example of this). After this "foundational period" in which information was gathered and minutely explained, the need arose for the Chinese to assimilate those contents, find a synthesis between the different doctrines and theories, and make those compatible with the Chinese tradition and cultural background. The practice of the *yishu* commentaries is inscribed into this new hermeneutical effort arisen around the mid-fifth century of which Daosheng is certainly a pioneer<sup>655</sup>.

#### 4. Geographical and cultural factors

It has been shown above how the *yishu* commentarial format particularly suited the features of the Southern scholarship, which was "clear and penetrating, concise and essential" (*qing* 清, *tong* 通, *jian* 簡, *yao* 要) and could reach an extraordinary depth by focusing on a limited range of materials (what Zhi Dun called "peering at the sun through a window")<sup>656</sup>.

Judging from his biography, his Buddhist training and the surviving writings, Daosheng's scholarship can be described on the whole as maintaining a typical southern approach. This appears to be reflected in his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* where the concern is not so much for what can be *found and seen* in the scripture (philologically considered), but rather for what can be *found and seen through* it.

This makes his approach less constrained by the "letter" of the surface text. Such freedom in interpretation and originality is confirmed by the fact that, unlike Kumārajīva and Sengzhao, Daosheng never uses quotations from other sūtras to support a certain interpretation, a feature which is found also in his only extant complete work, i.e. *Expository Commentary on the Lotus Sūtra* (*Miaofa lianhua jing shu* 妙法蓮華經疏 [X0577], dating AD 432).<sup>657</sup>

These arguments notwithstanding, there are also reasons against considering Daosheng's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* a *yishu* commentary. The first one is that the commentary, even though not covering the whole content of the sūtra, maintains a quite close connection to sūtra text, to the point that it contains numerous textual references to it often introduced by expressions like "the two sentences above", "from here on", "the four sentences above"<sup>658</sup> etc. This would make it rather hard to follow the commentary without checking at the same time the sūtra text, even admitted that the reader is already well acquainted with the scripture.

The second element against considering Daosheng's commentary a *yishu* commentary is the absence of "analytical parceling". Above I have pointed out that the *kepan* constitutes one of the typical features of the *yishu* format; however, if we examine Daosheng's *Commentary* we find no trace of this practice. The Tiantai master Zhiyi 智顗 (Sui dynasty) relates in his *Weimo jing lüeshu* 維摩經略疏 (*Essential Expository Commentary on the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*) that Daosheng (as well as the other Guanzhong commentators of the text) did not parcel the text, and adds that he derived his own *kepan* 科判 from some general observations made by Sengzhao on the

<sup>655</sup> Kanno identifies Daosheng as one of the earliest and most important authors of *yishu* commentaries and describes his work as foundational in this regard: "even in Chinese Buddhist circles, interlinear commentaries were compiled first, and only later did the exposition of meaning style of commentary become popular. It was Daosheng's era that marked this point of transformation. Daosheng's *Miaofa lianhua jing shu* 妙法蓮華經疏 being one of the earliest extant commentary in his 'exegesis of meaning' style, [many of its] attributes [...] went on to be incorporated into later commentaries" (Kanno Hiroshi 2003, p. 308)

<sup>656</sup> These characterizations of the Southern scholarship are found in *Shishuo xinyu*, *Wenxue* 25 (cf. Yu Jiaxi 1993, p. 189)

<sup>657</sup> A full English translation of this important work preceded by a rich introduction on the author, historical background, exegetical approach etc. has been produced by Kim Young-ho (see Kim 1990).

<sup>658</sup> 「此上二句」(p. 345, b12-13); 「自此以下」(p. 346, a4, and p. 412, a15); 「上四句」(p. 346, b5)

overall structure of the sūtra<sup>659</sup>. The fact that Zhiyi could not rely on earlier works for undertaking such division suggests that the parsing of this scripture started quite late (possibly with Zhiyi himself).

Upon examining the elements in favor and those against the inclusion of Daosheng's commentary in the *yishu* category, the hypothesis can be reasonably made that this is a "proto-*yishu*" commentary; in other words, it could represent an intermediate stage of development between the interlinear exegesis and the *Exposition of meaning* format; in fact, on the one side it has already moved away from the extensive word by word explanation including consistent philological and cultural information - an approach that is well represented by Kumārajīva and Sengzhao's commentaries -; on the other, it has not yet found that inner consistency and well-ordered structure given by the parceling method (indeed, Daosheng's annotations seem quite "dispersed" and "loose") which would become characteristic of this exegetical style. Given that Daosheng is a pioneer of the *yishu*-type commentary we can easily imagine that he went through a period of experimentation; such phase is likely to have coincided with the early years upon his return to Jianye from Chang'an, right the years in which - as I have argued above - he probably composed his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*.

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<sup>659</sup> Zhiyi says: "Kumārajīva, Daosheng and all the ancient masters did not undertake an analytic parceling of the text; they just commented upon the text in its entirety. But [in his commentary] Sengzhao said 'This sūtra starts with [the chapter on] the *Buddha Lands* and ends with [the chapter] *Bestowal of the Dharma*. All the Mahāyāna doctrines conveyed by it are Inconceivable dharmas'. Hence [based on this we can infer that] the part [of the sūtra] preceding Jewel Accumulation's (Baoji 寶積) questions [to the Buddha] constitutes the "introduction" (*xū* 序), the chapter *Bestowal [of the dharma]* constitutes the "dissemination part" (*liutong* 流通), and the part in between is the "main discourse" (*zhengshuo* 正說)" 「什、生及古諸師，悉不開科段，直帖文解釋。而肇師云：“始于淨土，終法供養。其間所明雖殊不思議一也”。是則，寶積發問已前為序，囑累一品以為流通，其間並是正說也。】」《維摩經略疏》卷1〈佛國品1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1778, p. 563, a15-19).

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經 - The Making of a Collective Commentary

As it happened for the majority of early Chinese Buddhist and non-Buddhist texts, before being passed down to us in its present outlook the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* went through a long and continuous process of assembling, editing, polishing and collation, to the point that it can certainly be defined as a “collective work” not only with regard to its content but also under the viewpoint of its “making”.

In this chapter I collect and discuss the most relevant available evidence related to the editing process which eventually led to the production of *Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經 in 10 fascicles, this being the version of the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* which has been transmitted to the present day and was included in Taishō Tripiṭaka vol. 38, n. 1775 (the Taishō edition is the one I have adopted as main reference). Even though many aspects of the composition of this text will inevitably remain in the dark, nevertheless some ground will be made for advancing some credible hypothesis. In more general terms this inquiry will serve to give an insight into the modes and mechanisms of production and transmission of early Chinese Buddhist texts.

As I will show, with regard to this commentary things are problematic since the very beginning; in fact, it seems that two different translations of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* were produced by Kumārajīva, the first one relying more heavily on the previous version by Zhi Qian and the second (i.e. *Weimojie suo shuo jing* 維摩詰所說經 [T475]) being more polished and readable. Two different scribes wrote down those two versions (probably Sengrui the first and Sengzhao the second), and some evidence suggests that Kumārajīva provided in the first version explanations that he later changed in the second.

In the second place I discuss the editorial insertions which are found in T1775; these are important “fingerprints” left by the editors that reveal something about their *modus operandi*. Then I proceed to present a group of documents from Dunhuang and Turfan related to the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, and on the basis of such documental evidence and other canonical sources I describe the historical vicissitudes leading to the “abandonment” of the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* under the Sui and its re-discovery during the mid-Tang.

As to the first assembly of the various Guanzhong independent commentaries into one text, this must have taken place during the Southern Dynasties (most probably under the Southern Liang 南梁, 502 - 557); this early collective version perhaps corresponded to the version in 8 fascicles which has been partially transmitted to us. The 8 fascicles version was in turn further revised and polished during the mid-Tang under the impulse of Daoye’s *Jingming jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 [T2777] and transformed into the 10 fascicles version which - after being further polished and collated under the Northern Song 北宋 (960 - 1127) - was bound to gain prominence and become the “standard” version of the text.

#### 1. Two different versions of Kumārajīva’s *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*?

We know from the sources about an interesting phenomenon occurring at the translation center in Chang’an under the Later Qin, i.e. the editing of the “final version” of a text usually went through different stages and covered a consistent period of time during which one or more “intermediate versions” were produced. Sometimes this led to the circulation of translated texts in “non-revised” or “draft” versions, an eventuality which was intrinsic to the organization of the translation activity which allowed (or even “called for”) the attendance of great numbers of monks and laymen who could write down on their own initiative what was being said in the translation hall and circulate those annotations.

On this regard, the best documented example is that of the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā*. As we learn from Sengrui's preface<sup>660</sup>, the text started being "issued" on May 29, 403<sup>661</sup>, and the "oral delivery" was completed on January 13, 404<sup>662</sup>. Revision of the Chinese translation was then undertaken, and ended by May 18, 404<sup>663</sup>. Even though the final version had been roughly decided, when the text was re-checked with the aid of the commentary *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (which at that time was undergoing translation) many shortcomings were found. Therefore it was decided to first complete the translation of the *Da zhidu lun* and then re-control the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* with its aid. As soon as the translation of *Da zhidu lun* was completed (December 27 of the year 405), the revision of the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* was also concluded<sup>664</sup>. As Sengrui tells us in his preface, between the first and the second revision of the text "intermediate versions" had already started circulating in a non-official way:

定之未已，已有寫而傳者，又有以意增損，私以《般若波羅蜜》為題者。致使文言舛錯，前後不同。《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 53, b13-15)  
When the final edition had not yet been established, somebody had already transcribed and spread the text. And someone had even enlarged [some parts of it] and abridged [others] and given [the text] on his own initiative the title of *Prajñāpāramitā* 般若波羅蜜. This ended up in mistakes in the text and discrepancies between different parts.

In the case of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, it seems that an early draft of the Chinese translation was ready at least one year before the final version was published (406). The title of this text was different from the one chosen for the last version: it was called *Pimoluoji jing* 毘摩羅詰提經 (in the discussion below I will call it for convenience "version 1"); and it must have been this version that Sengrui noted down as a scribe and commented upon in his *Pimoluoji jing yishu* 毘摩羅詰提經義疏 whose preface is still preserved in *Chu sanzang jiji* ([T2145], p. 58, c11-p. 59, a18)<sup>665</sup>.

Only few traces of this early version survive. We find some quotes from it in the *Da zhidu lun* (translation completed at the end of 405)<sup>666</sup>, a work in which indeed the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is always called *Pimoluojie jing* 毘摩羅詰經 and Vimalakīrti's name is rendered as "Pimoluojie" 毘摩羅詰. If we compare these passages with the final version (i.e. *Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經 [T475] in 3 fascicles, which I will call "version 2") we find that there is a great difference between the two, the former version borrowing more heavily from Zhi Qian's

<sup>660</sup> I.e., the *Preface to the Larger Prajñāpāramitā* 大品經序 preserved in *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], p. 52, c27-p. 53, b27.

<sup>661</sup> 「以弘始五年歲在癸卯四月二十三日，於京城之北逍遙園中出此經。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 53, b3-5)

<sup>662</sup> 「以其年十二月十五日出盡。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 53, b10)

<sup>663</sup> 「校正檢括。明年四月二十三日乃訖。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 53, b10-11)

<sup>664</sup> 「文雖粗定。以釋論檢 (read with variant 校) 之猶多不盡。是以隨出其論，隨而正之。釋論既訖，爾乃文定」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 53, b11-13)

<sup>665</sup> The fact that two different prefaces were written for Kumārajīva's translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (one by Sengrui and the other by Sengzhao) represents a quite unusual phenomenon; in fact, official translations produced under Later Qin had usually one single preface, and it was a great honor to be chosen for undertaking the task of composing it (e.g., when the translation of *Da zhidu lun* had been completed "the monks urged each other on [to write the preface] but refused to do it [themselves]", so that in the end the king Yao Xing had to ask the venerable Huiyuan to do so. See on this T2145, p. 110, b3-14, transl. in Zürcher 2007, p. 249). This reinforces the hypothesis that we are dealing here with two different, successive versions of the sūtra.

<sup>666</sup> It is important to remark here that the *Da zhidu lun* is not *in toto* the Chinese translation of a Sanskrit original. In fact, it contains also important additional materials that are clearly addressed to a Chinese audience and aimed at dispelling doubts on specific issues, providing explanations of Sanskrit terms, relating Indian customs and lore etc..

Moreover, Sengrui's deep involvement in the production of *Da zhidu lun* has led Chou Po-kan to formulate the hypothesis that he was the actual editor of the text (cf. Chou Po-kan 2004); if it were so, the presence of passages from his version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in this work would be more than natural.



translation and the second being more polished and readable. A few examples will serve to prove this statement<sup>667</sup>:

<p><b>“Version 1”</b>  「如《毘摩羅詰經》中說：  佛在毘耶離國，是時佛語阿難：「我身中熱風氣發，當用牛乳。汝持我鉢，乞牛乳來。」阿難持佛鉢，晨朝入毘耶離，至一居士門立。是時，<u>毘摩羅詰</u>在是中行，見阿難持鉢而立，問阿難：「汝何以晨朝持鉢立此？」阿難答言：「佛身小疾，當用牛乳，故我到此。」《大智度論》卷 9〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 122, a23-29)  As it is said in the <i>Pimoluojie jing</i>,  “The Buddha was in Vaiśali. At that time the Buddha said to Ānanda: ‘I [feel sick due to] influence of the heat produced in my body, and I’d need to take some cow’s milk [as a remedy]. Take my bowl, go beg for some milk and come back.’ Ānanda took Buddha’s bowl [and left]. At dawn he entered in Vaiśali, he reached a laymen’s house and stood by the gateway.  At that moment Vimalakīrti passed by, he saw Ānanda standing with the bowl in his hand and asked Ānanda: ‘Why are you standing here early in the morning with a bowl [in your hands]?’ Ānanda answered: ‘The Buddha has a slight illness and needs to take some cow’s milk; this is why I have come here.’”</p>	<p><b>“Version 2” [T 457]</b>  「佛告阿難：「汝行詣維摩詰問疾。」  阿難白佛言：「世尊！我不堪任詣彼問疾。所以者何？憶念昔時，世尊身小有疾，當用牛乳，我即持鉢，詣大婆羅門家門下立。時，<u>維摩詰</u>來謂我言：『唯，阿難！何為晨朝持鉢住此？』我言：『居士！世尊身小有疾，當用牛乳，故來至此。』」《維摩詰所說經》卷 1〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 542, a1-6)  The Buddha told Ānanda, “You go inquire about Vimalakīrti’s illness.”  Ānanda addressed the Buddha, “World-honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why? I remember once in the past, the World-honored One had a slight illness and needed to take some cow’s milk [as a remedy]. So I took the bowl, I proceeded to the gateway of a great brahman home and stood there. At that moment Vimalakīrti came and said to me: ‘O Ānanda, why are you standing here early in the morning with your bowl?’  “I said, ‘O retired scholar, the World-honored One has a slight illness and needs to take some cow’s milk; this is why I have come here.’”</p>
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It is clear how the first version is more repetitive and much less fluent and literary refined than the second one. Moreover, the first version resorts more often to employing words and expressions which are found in Zhi Qian’s versions. For example, “version 2” only says that the Buddha had “a slight illness”, whereas “version 1” follows Zhi Qian’s translation and characterizes the illness as deriving from the “production of heat in the body”<sup>668</sup>; furthermore, “version 2” says that Ānanda reached “a great Brahman home”, whereas “version 1” follows Zhi Qian and just says “a layman’s house”<sup>669</sup>.

Let us consider another example:

<p><b>“Version 1”</b>  「如《毘摩羅詰經》所說：「以七夜為劫壽。」以是因緣故，菩薩乘神通力，能速疾超越十方世界。」《大智度論》卷 30〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 284, a1-3)  As the <i>Pimoluojie jing</i> says,  “[a bodhisattva can cause those sentient beings] to consider [the timespan of] seven nights as equal to the longevity of a[n entire] <i>kalpa</i>”.</p>	<p><b>“Version 2 [T14]”</b>  「又，舍利弗！或有眾生，樂久住世而可度者，菩薩即延七日以為一劫，令彼眾生謂之一劫；或有眾生不樂久住，而可度者，菩薩即促一劫以為七日，令彼眾生謂之七日。」《維摩詰所說經》卷 2〈不思議品 6〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 546, c8-12)  “Furthermore, Śāriputra, if there are sentient beings who can be saved through their desire for</p>
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<sup>667</sup> For a comprehensive table of correspondences between the quotes from *Da zhidu lun* and T14 see Tu Yanqiu 2015 (a), in particular pp. 55 - 58

<sup>668</sup> 「世尊身小中風，當用牛漚。」《佛說維摩詰經》卷 1〈弟子品 3〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 474, p. 523, b22)

<sup>669</sup> 「至一居士門立」《大智度論》卷 9〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 122, a25-26)

Because of these causes and conditions, the bodhisattva can rely on his supernatural powers for rapidly going beyond this world of the ten directions.	longevity, a bodhisattva will extend seven days into an entire <i>kalpa</i> and cause those sentient beings to consider it a <i>kalpa</i> . If there are sentient beings who can be saved through their desire for brevity of lifespan, a bodhisattva will compress an entire <i>kalpa</i> into seven days and cause those sentient beings to consider it [only] seven days (MR, p. 120).
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In the above comparison we can notice how the expression “seven nights” in “version 1” was changed into “seven days” in “version 2”. Again, the text of the former version follows Zhi Qian’s in using those terms<sup>670</sup>.

Some other traces of the *Pimoluojie jing* 毘摩羅詰經 - which so far have gone unnoticed - are found in the *Dasheng dayi zhang* 大乘大義章 [T1856], a collection of epistles exchanged between Kumārajīva and the monk Huiyuan 慧遠, leader of the southern Buddhist community of Mount Lu.

In one of Huiyuan’s letters we find for example the following quote:

「《毘摩羅詰經》〈善權品〉云：“如來身者，法化所成”」《鳩摩羅什法師大義》卷 1 (CBETA, T45, no. 1856, p. 123, a29-b1)

The chapter «Skillful Means» of the *Pimoluojie jing* says: “The body of the Tathāgata derives from the transformation of the Dharma (i.e. Doctrine)”

This sentence is reformulated in more clear and peremptory terms in “Version 2” which reads “The body of the Buddha *is* the Dharma body”<sup>671</sup>, an expression which is not found in Zhi Qian’s version and might well have been chosen by Kumārajīva also as a result of his thorough discussions on the “dharma body” with Huiyuan. However, what is noteworthy here is that the chapter quoted maintains the same title as in Zhi Qian’s version («Skill in Means Chapter», *Shanquan pin* 善權品), while this was subsequently modified into «Skillful Means Chapter» (*Fangbian pin* 方便品) in the second version. This detail reveals that “version 1” and “version 2” presented discrepancies also in the titles of the chapters.

Let us examine another quotation from the same epistolary collection:

<p><b>“Version 1”</b></p> <p>「又《毘摩羅詰經》摩訶迦葉與目連悔責：“一切聲聞皆應號泣。”此是愛習之氣。《鳩摩羅什法師大義》卷 2 (CBETA, T45, no. 1856, p. 133, c7-9)</p> <p>Furthermore, in the <i>Pimoluojie jing</i> Mahākāśyapa and Maudgalyayana repent and admonish themselves: “The <i>śrāvakas</i> should all scream out a cry.” This (<i>viz.</i> the fact that the <i>śrāvakas</i> could not understand the teaching of the inconceivable emancipation) is [due to] the force of the habit of attachment [to the doctrine].</p>	<p><b>“Version 2 [T14]”</b></p> <p>「是時大迦葉聞說菩薩不可思議解脫法門，歎未曾有，謂舍利弗：[...] 一切聲聞，聞是不可思議解脫法門，皆應號泣，聲震三千大千世界；」《維摩詰所說經》卷 2 〈不思議品 6〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 547, a9-10)</p> <p>Then Mahākāśyapa, hearing the teaching of the bodhisattva’s inconceivable emancipation, exclaimed that it was marvelous<sup>672</sup> and said to Śāriputra, [...]: “When all the <i>śrāvakas</i> hear this teaching of the inconceivable emancipation, they should all scream out a cry to shake the trimegachilocosm.” (MR, p. 121)</p>
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<sup>670</sup> 「舍利弗！有無量人生死奉律，立不思議門菩薩者，為奉律人現七夜為劫壽，人信知謂劫過，不知是七夜也。」《佛說維摩詰經》卷 1 〈不思議品 6〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 474, p. 527, b24-26)

<sup>671</sup> 「佛身者，即法身也」《維摩詰所說經》卷 1 〈方便品 2〉 (CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 539, c1)

<sup>672</sup> “Marvelous”: McRae has instead “unprecedented”.

The above passage from version 1 is found in one of Kumārajīva's letters in which he answers the questions posed by Huiyuan. Even though the statement "the śrāvakas should all scream out a cry" is here attributed to Mahākāśyapa and Maudgalyayana instead of Śāriputra (as in version 2), its phrasing is perfectly identical in the two versions and is considerably different from Zhi Qian's translation of the corresponding passage which reads instead "When [Buddha's] disciples hear this teaching, they should all weep with grief and instruct [the beings in] the trimegachiliocosm [on it]."<sup>673</sup>

The two above quotes prove that in their epistolary exchange both Huiyuan and Kumārajīva refer to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as *Pimoluojie jing* 毘摩羅詰經. However, there is a third quote in which the text is instead called by Kumārajīva *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經 (which is the title chosen for "version 2"):

「如蓮華雖淨，必因泥生，不可生於金山上，如《維摩詰經》中說。」《鳩摩羅什法師大義》卷 1 (CBETA, T45, no. 1856, p. 128, c20-21)

[...] it is as the lotus flowers, which pure as they are, yet necessarily grow in the marshes. They cannot grow on golden mountains, as it is said in the *Weimojie jing*.<sup>674</sup>

If, as Zürcher states, the eighteen letters included in *Dasheng da yizhang* 大乘大義章 were written along the years between ca. 405 and 409 AD<sup>675</sup> the switch between one title and the other might well be due to the appearance of the second version of the scripture and the consequent discarding (or, at least, the becoming obsolete) of the former one. "Version 1" would then represents an early translation draft which on the one side maintained many of Zhi Qian's translation choices while on the other modified others preferring new solutions which in some cases were kept in the final version.

The becoming obsolete of "version 1" could also be the reason (or at least one of the reasons) why Sengrui's comments were not included in T1775: following a rather different version of the text, his annotations could not be easily inserted alongside with the other commentaries. Probably also Daorong's commentary referred to this early translation of the text, given that in his single surviving commentarial entry *Vimalakīrti* is called *Pimo* 毘摩, a phonetic rendering that does not occur anywhere else in T1775.

No details about the production of "version 1" are known to us, except for the fact that it was probably Sengrui who wrote down the Chinese text as a scribe<sup>676</sup>. As to "version 2", it is likely that the scribe was instead Sengzhao, and this would explain the perfect adherence of his commentary to the sūtra text, and also T1775 being traditionally attributed to him<sup>677</sup>.

<sup>673</sup> 「一切弟子聞是說者，當以悲泣曉喻一切三千世界，」《佛說維摩詰經》卷 1〈不思議品 6〉(CBETA, T14, no. 474, p. 527, c17-18)

<sup>674</sup> The reference is to chapter 8 ("The Path of Buddhahood"): "It is just as lotus flowers do not grow on dry land on the high plateau—these flowers grow in the muddy filth of the lowly marshes." (MR, p. 135) 「譬如高原陸地，不生蓮華，卑濕淤泥乃生此華」《維摩詰所說經》卷 2〈佛道品 8〉(CBETA, T14, no. 475, p. 549, b6-7). The rendering of this passage is fairly close to Zhi Qian's version: 「譬如，族姓子！高原陸土，不生青蓮芙蓉蘅華，卑濕汚田，乃生此華。」《佛說維摩詰經》卷 2〈如來種品 8〉(CBETA, T14, no. 474, p. 529, c8-9)

<sup>675</sup> See Zürcher 2007, p. 226

<sup>676</sup> We find a sentence in Sengrui's preface that seems to validate this hypothesis: "If I had not been the scribe, how could I be qualified [for explaining the meaning of the text]?" 「自非筆受，胡可勝哉」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 59, a16-17). However, it is unclear whether *bishou* 筆受 (to write down something that has been heard) here refers to the sūtra text, to the commentary, or both.

<sup>677</sup> Daoye credits Sengzhao with being the scribe 「什重出此經。肇筆受。因之注解及製序呈什。什又歎曰。解空第一筆公其人。」《淨名經關中釋抄》卷 1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2778, p. 510, b9-10); Fei Zhangfang also does so in his *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶紀「維摩詰經三卷(弘始八年於大寺出。是第四譯。與佛調支謙法護等出者

For what regards the exegesis of the text, there is some evidence that in version 1 Kumārajīva provided interpretations which he corrected afterwards in version 2. In Jizang's 吉藏 (549 - 623) *Weimojing yishu* 維摩經義疏 [T1781] we find the following precious quote referred to the sūtra line “已無心意、無受行，而悉摧伏諸外道” (these are actually two verses of a gāthā) which I reproduce here in context in McRae's English translation (the verses in question are in bold type):

[Initially, under the bodhi tree you [, the Buddha,] forcefully subjugated Māra,  
Attaining extinction, like sweet dew, and achieving enlightenment.]

**Without any intention in mind and without experiencing any process,  
You thoroughly vanquished the heterodox paths.**

[With three turnings of the wheel of the Dharma in the chiliocosm,  
Without any intention in mind and without experiencing any process,  
You thoroughly vanquished the heterodox paths”] (MR, p. 73)

In his commentary Jizang reveals:

「吉藏曾見僧叡義疏，述什公意云：“此句應在‘降魔’之前。初出家時，受學外道，行眾苦行。爾時無憊道之心，受學之意<sup>678</sup>。欲示難行，能伏諸外道。故言‘以無心意，無受行’，然後降眾魔，成正覺，轉法輪，現三寶。是為次第！而在後列者，但成佛已後，正悟既彰，則示前苦行，伏邪義顯也。”」《維摩經義疏》卷 2〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1781, p. 925, c20-26)

[I], Jizang, have seen Sengrui's *Exposition of meaning Commentary [on the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa in which] he relates Kumārajīva's opinion, viz. “This sentence should be placed before ‘subjugated Māra’.* [In fact,] when he (i.e., the Buddha) first became a renunciant, he studied the heterodox doctrines and practiced the [religious] austerities. At that time he did not [actually] have the desire [to pursue their] goal, nor had he the intention to learn [from them], he [just] wanted to manifest those austerities and [show that] he was able to ‘vanquish the heterodox paths’. This is why [the text] says ‘being without the desire [of pursuing their path] and without the intention [of learning from them], he did not [actually] learn [from them] nor practice [the austerities]’. It is only after that that he subjugated all Māras, achieved perfect enlightenment, turned the wheel of the Dharma and manifested the Three Jewels. This is the correct sequence. And if you place the sentence [in question] afterwards, [it would mean that] it is only after attaining Buddhahood, when the perfect awakening was displayed, that [the Buddha] showed his previous austerities and that his subjugation of heterodox [paths] became manifest’<sup>679</sup>.

Due to a fortunate coincidence, besides Kumārajīva's comment on this passage we also possess Sengrui's own one (which has been preserved in Daoye's 道液 *Jingming jing Guanzhong shichao* 淨名經關中釋抄)<sup>680</sup>, and it is substantially in tune with the Kuchean master's understanding.

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大同小異。僧肇筆受。見二秦錄。什自注解。叡制序)」《歷代三寶記》卷 8 (CBETA, T49, no. 2034, p. 77, c17-18)

<sup>678</sup> For the sake of clarity, Kumārajīva's exegeses of this sentence can be summarized as follows: 已無心 (=無憊道之心) 意 (=無受學之意)、無受 (=受學外道) 行 (=行眾苦行)。

<sup>679</sup> Curiously enough, Jizang's comment on the gāthā verses continues as follows: “Somebody says that ‘wuxin’ 無心 means ‘without discriminative mind (Skr. *viññāna*)’ and that ‘wu shou xing’ 無受行 means ‘without feeling (Skr. *vedanā*), conceptions (Skr. *saṃjñā*) and consciousness (Skr. *saṃskāra*)’. When [the Buddha] subdues by being without [these] mental attributes, there is [actually] no one he cannot subdue”. 「有人言：‘無心者，無識陰也。無受行者，無受、想、行三心也。以無心而伏，故無不伏。’」《維摩經義疏》卷 2〈佛國品 1〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1781, p. 925, c26-28). Such exegesis is almost identical to Kumārajīva's comment in ‘version 2’.

<sup>680</sup> Sengrui's commentary reads as follows: “SR: As to the meaning of *wu shou xing* 無受行, it is as it has been [explained] in the above quote (and this very likely refers to Kumārajīva's opinion translated above). [When the Buddha] practiced the austerities as the heterodox paths did, it was without intention that he learnt and practiced

However, in ‘version 2’ (T1775) no mention is made of the incorrectness of the sequence (which, incidentally, has not been modified in the sūtra text). In fact, here *wu xin yi* 無心意 is understood by the Kuchean translator as “not having a divided mind”<sup>681</sup> and *wu shou xing* 無受行 as “without feeling, conceptions and consciousness”<sup>682</sup>; in such way the sūtra text finds a new inner coherence<sup>683</sup> and the whole reference to Gautama’s practice of austerities is eventually dismissed.

## 2. Editorial insertions in *Zhu Weimojie jing* [T1775]

### 2.1 “Another version says” (*bieben yun* 別本云)

Not only the version of the scripture commented upon by Sengrui differed considerably from the one commented by Sengzhao, but also the version commented by Kumārajīva differed, however only slightly, from that of Sengzhao and Daosheng. When assembling the three commentaries into T1775 the editors noticed these discrepancies and, for the sake of clarity, reported the variants of the sūtra text before Kumārajīva’s comment introducing them with the script “Another version says” (27 occurrences in total)<sup>684</sup>. These are the only cases in which the standard sequence of the commentaries (i.e., 1. Kumārajīva, 2. Sengzhao, 3. Daosheng) is altered: after the sūtra text Sengzhao and Daosheng’s commentaries are quoted first, then Kumārajīva’s comment follows, preceded by the alternative sūtra text. Let us examine some occurrences of this phenomenon:

#### 1. 「爾時舍利弗承佛威神。」

別本云：“承佛聖旨。”[什]曰。聖旨梵本云“神力”。神力所轉，能令無疑者而發疑念也。」《注維摩詰經》卷1〈佛國品1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 337, b7-9)

[them]. Such *modus operandi* just aimed at vanquishing the heterodox paths by showing that their heterodox doctrines did not lead to attain the nirvāṇa. Had the bodhisattva [Gautama Buddha] not practiced [the heterodox doctrines], they would have said “Our doctrine too has a nirvāṇa [that can be achieved]”. But since [Gautama] practiced [their methods] and did not achieve [nirvāṇa], we know that they [actually] do not have it. It is in this way that he “vanquished [them]”. 「無受行者。叡曰。無受行(音衡)，如前引。同外道苦行等，無心受行。彼法但欲摧伏外道，令知邪法無涅槃果，故(加 variant 若)菩薩不學，即云“我法亦有涅槃”。以菩薩學而不得，故知無也。所以摧伏。」《淨名經關中釋抄》卷1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2778, p. 515, b6-10)

In *Jingming jing Guanzhong shichao* Sengrui’s comment is followed by Sengzhao’s one (this entry is absent from T1775) which is completely in tune with Kumārajīva’s explanation in “version 2”: “SZ: ‘Without feeling and consciousness (*wu shou xing* 無受行) means that the ordinary men and the followers of the Two Vehicles (Śrāvaka and Pratyekabuddha) cling to the [illusory] appearances, so that feeling (*shou* 受) is produced in their mind; feeling in turn produces attachment and attachment gives rise to consciousness (*xing* 行). Buddha in his wisdom does not cling to appearances, so he has no mental activity; being without mental activity he does not have sensation and hence consciousness does not arise” [肇]云。無受行(音幸)謂凡夫二乘取相故有心受。有心受即著。著即起行。佛智不取相故無心。無心即不受。不受即不起行也。」《淨名經關中釋抄》卷1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2778, p. 515, b10-13)

<sup>681</sup> 「已無心意。[什]曰。無別意也。」《注維摩詰經》卷1〈佛國品1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 333, a24)

<sup>682</sup> 「無受行。[什]曰。無受、想、行。」《注維摩詰經》卷1〈佛國品1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 333, a25)

<sup>683</sup> In fact, the absence of discriminative mind, feeling, conceptions and consciousness are held to describe the state of the Buddha after enlightenment, and the vanquishing of the heterodox paths is envisioned as the consequence of his attainment of Nirvāṇa, something which proved the supremacy of his doctrine over the others.

<sup>684</sup> It must be noted, however, that in a limited number of cases the relation between Kumārajīva’s comment and the alternative version quoted is less evident and it seems that the editorial insertion is intended to complement rather than to substitute the actual version. See for example the following case: 「念、定、總持、辯才不斷。[肇]曰：念，正念；定，正定；總持，謂持善不失、持惡不生。無所漏忘，謂之持。持有二種：有心相應持、不相應持。辯才，七辯也。此四是大士之要用故常不斷。別本云。其念不遠斷，乃至辯才成就。[什]曰：念者，無上道念也。不斷，不中斷也。“不斷”義，通貫下三法也 (lit. “the phrase *bu duan* 不斷 refers to all the three terms [mentioned] below)。菩薩得此四法，深入堅固。遯身不失歷劫愈明，故言“不斷”也。」《注維摩詰經》卷1〈佛國品1〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 329, a28-b6)



**At that time Śāriputra was influenced by the Buddha's majestic charisma (anubhāva)**

**Another version says: “was influenced by the Buddha's numinous intention”**

K: [As to the expression] “numinous intention”, the Sanskrit version has “numinous power”. The influence of the numinous power can cause [Śāriputra] who had no doubts in his mind to conceive a doubt.

Without the editorial insertion reporting the variant of the sūtra text commented upon by Kumārajīva it would have been hard for the reader to figure out what the expression “numinous insight” was referring to in the comment.

**2. 「法住實際。別本云：“法同如、法性、實際。”**

什曰。此三同一實也。因觀時有深淺故有三名。始見其實謂之“如”，轉深謂之“性”，盡其邊謂之“實際”。以新學為六情所牽，心隨物變。觀時見同，出則見異。故明諸法同此三法。」《注維摩詰經》卷2〈弟子品3〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 346, c26-p. 347, a2)

**The Dharma abides in the Reality-limit.**

**Another version says: “The ‘Dharma’ is identical to ‘Suchness’, ‘Dharma Nature’ and ‘True Reality’”**

K: These three [terms] indicate the same thing. Since [the Dharma] can be looked at with different degrees of depth, these three different names are used. When one first sees its reality, he calls it “Suchness”; when his vision grows deeper, he calls it “[Dharma-]nature”; when he fathoms its boundaries, he calls it “Reality-limit”. Since those who are still beginners [in the Buddhist practice] are hindered by the six feelings, their mind (=mental representation) changes according to the things [they examine]. What they look at may be the same, but then they conceptualize it in a different way. It is clear then why all dharmas are identical to these three dharmas.

In the above case it is clear how Kumārajīva is not commenting on the sūtra text but on an alternative version of it. Without this “editorial insertion” it would have been impossible to figure out why at this point Kumārajīva elaborated an explanation of the “three terms” ‘Suchness’, ‘Dharma-Nature’ and ‘Reality-limit’, asserting their coincidence.

**3. 「答曰：“當行正念。”**

生曰。[...]

別本云：正憶念。

什曰。正憶念，通始終，兼精麤。凡非邪想，念不乖理，皆名憶念也。」《注維摩詰經》卷6〈觀眾生品7〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 386, a18-23)

**Answer: “One should practice correct mindfulness.” (MR, p. 126)**

DS: [..]

**Another version says: “correct mentation”**

K: To correct one's mentation [means] to penetrate beginning and end, to unify the subtle and the rough. Every time one discards evil thoughts and do not contravene the Principle with his mental activity, this is called “[correct] mentation”.

Here again we have a slight discrepancy between the sūtra text followed by Daosheng (which reads “correct mindfulness”) and by Kumārajīva (who has instead “correct mentation”). The insertion is no doubt useful in allowing the reader to follow Kumārajīva's commentary and to correctly understand it.

Long ago this kind of editorial insertions has attracted the attention of Japanese scholars who formulated various hypotheses on them. Kimura has listed the three main ones: 1. The “other version” indicates the Sanskrit version of the text; 2. it indicates a different record of Kumārajīva's version of the sūtra text; 3. it indicates a wholly different translation of the text



produced prior to Kumārajīva's one and available at his time<sup>685</sup>. Okayama (1977) had previously spoken in favor of the third hypothesis suggesting that the "other version" was probably the now lost translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* produced by Dharmarakṣa 竺法護<sup>686</sup>. Kimura (1987) opted instead for the second one. He argued that in the translation ground different disciples noted down the translation and the official version was based on those drafts; according to him, this alternative draft might correspond to the above mentioned *Pimoluojie jing* 毘摩羅詰經<sup>687</sup>. More recently (2005), Tu Yanqiu has reconsidered this issue in one of her articles, and she has concluded that the script "another version" indicates an alternative version of the sūtra quoted by Kumārajīva and highly regarded by him<sup>688</sup>.

Upon collecting and examining all the passages in question in T1775, I have formed the opinion that the discussion that has grown on this topic is perhaps over-elaborate and the reality might be simpler than it has been argued. In the first place, it is unlikely that the "other version" indicates a Sanskrit version; in fact (as pointed out in the preceding chapter) the original foreign manuscript(s) is often quoted by Kumārajīva in order to assess some renderings chosen by the scribe (these entries are introduced by the script "The Sanskrit version says" 梵本云). Second, it is also improbable that the "other version" indicates a wholly different Chinese edition of the text; in fact, in the limited number of quotes that are found in T1775 (27 in total) we find variants that present very small differences with the main text. Third, it seems quite clear that the "other version" is not a text quoted by Kumārajīva; in fact, if this were the case, this would have been found after the usual formula "Kumārajīva said" (*Shi yue* 什曰) and not before it. This makes it even more evident that the alternative version represents an editorial insertion.

I agree with Kimura's main argument that the "alternative version" does not necessarily represent an entirely different edition of the text. As we can imagine, during the oral translation of the sūtra many different Chinese renderings were proposed and orally discussed by Kumārajīva and the Chinese exegetes before coming to a viable solution whose final written formulation depended on the designated scribe; it is likely that at the same time many other disciples noted down the comments issued in the translation hall, which were all - so to speak - "in the making", thus it is not surprising that some of the comments retained referred to a slightly different versions of the text. When the various independent commentaries were edited this did not constitute a problem; however, when these were assembled into a collective commentary the editors found out these small discrepancies and decided to point them out through *ad hoc* insertions. By "alternative version" they just intended the sūtra text followed by Kumārajīva's independent commentary.

This no doubt attests the remarkable philological rigor and accuracy of the editors of the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*. We do not find such punctiliousness in Daoye's 道液 *Jingming jing Guanzhong shu* [T2777] (on this work see 3.3) where no variants are mentioned (in the points where Kumārajīva's comment followed a different reading of the sūtra text his comments - perhaps wittingly, in order to avoid confusion - are always omitted).

This being said, I do not agree with Kimura's identification of the "alternative version" with the *Pimoluojie jing* 毘摩羅詰經. In fact, as I have shown above, the latter greatly differs from T 475, to the point that it cannot be considered as a different record deriving from the same translation session but as a wholly different earlier edition.

## 2.2 Other editorial insertions

Other editorial insertions are found throughout the T1775 which I mention here for the sake of completeness.

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<sup>685</sup> Cf. Kimura Senshō 1987, p. 100

<sup>686</sup> Cf. Okayama Hajime 1977, p. 155

<sup>687</sup> Cf. Kimura Senshō 1987, p. 104

<sup>688</sup> Tu Yanqiu 2005, pp. 124 - 132

Whenever Sengzhao's comment is the *verbatim* reproduction of Kumārajīva's one, the first is omitted and replaced by the script "[Sengzhao's] explanation is the same as the above one" (*shi tong shang ye* 釋同上也), or "[Seng]zhao's annotation is the same as the above one" (*Zhao zhu tong shang* 肇注同上), or also "[Seng]zhao's annotation is the same" (*Zhao zhu tong* 肇注同)<sup>689</sup>. This choice was no doubt intended to avoid useless repetitions and make the text smoother and more readable; it is found only in the two more recent surviving versions of the commentary (both in 10 scrolls) that have been used for preparing the edition included in the Taishō Tripiṭaka, the older 8 scrolls one reproducing instead word by word Sengzhao's annotation even when they perfectly match Kumārajīva's ones<sup>690</sup> (the differences between the 10 fascicles edition and the 8 fascicles one will be discussed below).

The Kan'ei 寬永 Version (1641) also includes editorial notes suggesting "adjustments" to the texts. For example, in the following passage a note points out that the comment in question is misplaced and should be positioned after a former passage (which is clearly the case):

「雪山、目真隣陀山、摩訶目真隣陀山、香山、寶山、金山、黑山、鐵圍山、大鐵圍山、大海江河川流泉源。

[...]【原】本註曰：“別本云”等七字，當移在於上“顯于大海”之下也。

**Snowy Mountains, Mucilinda Mountains, Mahāmucilinda Mountains, Fragrant Mountains, Jewel Mountains, Golden Mountains, Black Mountains, Iron Ring Mountains, and Great Iron Ring Mountains; the oceans, rivers, streams, and springs** (MR, pp. 71 - 72)

[...] An original annotation says: “Another version says etc.’, these seven characters should be moved below [the passage] ‘rising high above the ocean’”.

Another interesting - and very curious - editorial insertion (which is, however, absent from the 8 fascicles edition) is constituted by a long, almost *verbatim* quote from the *Introductory Chapter* 序品 of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* [T375], which is inserted in chapter 2 as part of one of Sengzhao's commentarial entries. The quote clearly represents an anachronism, given that the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* was translated in Jianye between 417 and 418, when Sengzhao (384 - 414) had already passed away.

In this case, the sentence which is commented upon reads: “[**This body is like a poisonous snake, a vengeful bandit**] **an empty aggregation**” (MR, p. 83)<sup>691</sup>. Originally, Sengzhao's comment summed up in few sentences the meaning of Kumārajīva's comment (a lengthy allegorical story)<sup>692</sup> and ended by pointing out that the similes used in the text were “explained in another sūtra”<sup>693</sup>. However, the editors of T1775 “expanded” this comment by adding the long quote mentioned above:

<sup>689</sup> See the following examples : 1. T1775, p. 331, c21-23; 2. T1775, p. 331, c25-27; 3. T38, no. 1775, p. 404, a21-24; 4. T1775, p. 404, a21-24.

<sup>690</sup> The *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* included in the Taishō edition of the canon (vol. 38, n. 1775) - which I have taken as main reference - is based upon the Kan'ei 寬永 version (in 10 scrolls) dating 1641. Two other extant version have been consulted for stating the critical edition of the text, namely the *Weimo jing jijie* 維摩經集解 in 8 scrolls, dating back to the Heian Period (794 - 1185) and another version in 10 scrolls dating 1686 (Jōkyō period 貞享, 1684 - 1688). The variants are pointed out in *ad hoc* footnotes.

<sup>691</sup> 「[是身如毒蛇，如怨賊，] 如空聚。」《注維摩詰經》卷 2〈方便品 2〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 342, b20-22)

<sup>692</sup> What must have been the “original” comment by Sengzhao on this passage is found in Daoye's *Jingming jijie Guanzhong shu*: 「是身如毒蛇，如怨賊，如空聚 [...] 肇曰：四大喻四蛇，五陰喻五賊，六情喻空聚，皆有成喻在他經。五陰、十八界、十二入，三法假合成身，猶若空聚，無可寄也。」《淨名經集解闡中疏卷上》卷 1 (CBETA, ZW02, no. 19, p. 226, a16-18).

<sup>693</sup> Similar instances are found in Sengzhao's commentary where the monk generically refers the reader to “other scriptures” as reference without clearly identifying them (in these cases he often uses the formula “*shi zai ta jing*” 事

肇曰：六情喻空聚。皆有誠證，喻在他經。是故《涅槃經》云：“觀身如四大毒蛇。是身無常。常為無量諸蟲之所啖食。是身臭穢。貪欲獄縛。是身可畏 (read with variant 惡)。猶如死狗。是身不淨。九孔常流。是身如城。血肉筋骨皮裹其上。手足以為却敵樓櫓。目為孔竅。頭為殿堂。心王處中。如是身城諸佛世尊之所棄捨。凡夫愚人常所味著。貪淫嗔恚愚癡羅刹止住其中。是身不堅。猶如蘆葦伊蘭水沫芭蕉之樹。是身無常念念不住。猶如電光暴水幻炎。亦如畫水隨畫隨合。是身易壞。猶如河岸臨峻大樹。是身不久。虎狼鴟梟鷲鷃餓狗之所食噉。誰有智者當樂此身。寧以牛跡盛大海水。不可具說是身無常不淨臭穢。寧團大地使如棗等漸漸轉小如亭歷子乃至微塵。不能具說是身過患。是故當捨如棄涕唾”」《注維摩詰經》卷2〈方便品2〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 342, b20-c22) SZ: The six feelings are described as an empty aggregate (=empty village). This [and the other similes] are well established [ones] and are explained in other sūtras. This is why the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* says: “You should look the body as the four vipers [representing] the four great elements. This carnal body is ever pecked at and supped by innumerable vermin. It smells ill and is defiled, being tied up by greed. This body is hateful, like the carcass of a dog. This body is impure, from which nine holes leak out defilements. It is like a castle, the blood, flesh, spine, bone and skin forming the outer walls and the hands and legs serving as bastions, the eyes as gunholes, and the head as donjon. The mind-king [citta-rāja] is seated within.

Such a carnal castle is what the all the Buddhas - the World-Honoured Ones - abandon and what the ordinary men and the ignorant always love and cling to. Such rākṣasas [flesh-eating demons] as greed, anger and ignorance sit within. This body is as frail as reed, eranda [foul-smelling “recinus communis” plant], foam, and plantain.

This body is non-eternal and does not stay stable even for a second: it is like lightning, madding water, and a mirage; it is also like a picture drawn on water, which no sooner done than disappears. This body breaks just as easily as a big tree hanging over a river precipice. It does not last long; it is pecked at and devoured by foxes, wolves, owls, eagles, crows, magpies and hungry dogs. Who with a good mind finds joy in such a carnal self?

One might sooner pour the water of the entire ocean into a cow’s footprint than fully explain the non-eternal, non-pure, ill-smell and defiled [nature] of this body; or one could sooner split the great earth and crush it into [pieces having] the size of a pickpurse [weed] seed or even the size of a dust-mote, but never could one fully explain the wrongs and ills of this body. This being so, one ought to discard it like snot or drool”.<sup>694</sup>

Why did the editors operate such insertion? Probably because they found that this passage from the *Nirvāṇasūtra* well fitted the context (and it truly does), and that it could correspond to the “other sūtra” mentioned by Sengzhao in his comment; they were perhaps not aware of the fact that Sengzhao’s commentary predated the Chinese translation of the *Nirvāṇasūtra*.

What is sure is that this passage has been inserted in the text quite early, at least by the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century; in fact in his *Yuanjue jing dashu shiyi chao* 圓覺經大疏釋義鈔 [X 245] Zongmi 宗密 (780 - 841), reporting Sengzhao’s comment in a version that is almost identical to the one found in *Jingming jing Guangzhong shu*, had already modified “the explanation is found in another scripture” into “the explanation is found in the *Nirvāṇasūtra*”.<sup>695</sup>

在他經，or “yu zai ta jing” 喻在他經). See for example: 1. T1775, p. 328, b1-3; 2. *Ibidem*, p. 336, b3-7; 3. *Ibidem*, p. 342, b14-16.

<sup>694</sup> The quote from the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* [T375] is adapted from Yamamoto’s English translation (Yamamoto 1973, p. 4)

<sup>695</sup> 「蛇喻四大，賊喻五陰，空聚喻六根。緣在涅槃經也。五陰十八界十二入。三法假合成身。猶若空聚。無一可寄。」《圓覺經大疏釋義鈔》卷6 (CBETA, X09, no. 245, p. 601, a2-4 // Z 1:14, p. 346, b4-6 // R14, p. 691, b4-6)

### 3. Manuscripts from Dunhuang and Turfan

In Dunhuang and Turfan<sup>696</sup> manuscripts have been found which are important for reconstructing the textual history of the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*. Some of them have already been included in the section “ancient lost books” (*gu yishu* 古逸書) of the Taishō Tripitaka, some others (mostly in form of fragments) are still available only in the manuscript form and are scattered in different collections around the world. Prof. Zheng Acai 鄭阿才 has collected those materials and provided a useful catalogue and an overview of them in two well-documented articles<sup>697</sup>.

#### 3.1 Fragments of collected annotations on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

Zheng has collected 45 documents related to the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*; of these, 27 come from Turfan and 18 from Dunhuang. If we divide the manuscripts into the two categories of “individual commentaries” and “collective commentaries” we find out that the great majority of manuscripts composed before Tang Dynasty belong to the first<sup>698</sup>, while the majority of those composed during the Tang belong to the second; this trend makes it clear that the collective version (whenever it was composed) gained prominence starting from the Tang and slowly supplanted the single independent commentaries which eventually almost disappeared, even though - as it bears mention - we still find them recorded (along with a collective version in 8 fascicles) as late as the Northern Song (960 - 1279) in the catalogue *Tōiki dentō mokuroku* 東域傳燈目錄 (1094) by the Japanese monk Eichō 永超 (1014 - 1095); the number of fascicles of the three independent commentaries coincide with those indicated by the Sui monk Fajing 法經 (d.u.) in his *Zhongjing mulu* 眾經目錄 [T2146] (594) (Kumārajīva’s commentary counted 3 fascicles, Sengzhao’s one 5 and Daosheng’s one 3)<sup>699</sup>.

#### 3.2 Sengzhao’s independent *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*

Among the materials found in Dunhuang, those reproducing part of Sengzhao’s independent *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* are particularly interesting.

As mentioned in the former chapter, among the documents from Dunhuang and Turfan collected by Zheng there are 13<sup>700</sup> containing fragments or larger portions of the separate commentary by Sengzhao. Among these, two documents are particularly important due to the consistent length of the text preserved and the very early date of composition; they are called *Weimojiejing jie* 維摩詰經解 (such title is found on one of the two documents) and were found in Dunhuang<sup>701</sup>. The scholar Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉 (1866 - 1940) first collated and published them in 1938<sup>702</sup> claiming in his brief introduction that they were produced right under the Later Qin<sup>703</sup>.

<sup>696</sup> As a general information on the manuscripts recovered in these two locations, it is useful to remind that the texts found in Turfan 吐魯番 date from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, whereas those found in the Mogao caves in Dunhuang 敦煌莫高窟藏經洞 range from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD.

<sup>697</sup> Zheng Acai 2016 (a) and Zheng Acai 2018

<sup>698</sup> Two exceptions deserve mention: 1. the manuscript from Dunhuang n. 325 of the Kyo-U Library Collection in Japan 日本杏雨書屋藏羽 dating Northern Dynasties 北朝 (136 lines preserved) includes part of Chapter 3 (*Dizi pin* 弟子品) of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* along with annotations by Sengzhao, Kumārajīva and Daosheng; 2. the manuscript from Dunhuang P. 2339 dating Nanbeichao 南北朝 (420 - 589) (322 lines preserved) includes the preface and part of Chapter 1 (*Foguo pin* 佛國品) of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* along with annotations by Kumārajīva and Sengzhao.

<sup>699</sup> 「維摩經注解三卷 (羅什)」《眾經目錄》卷 6 (CBETA, T55, no. 2146, p. 147, a17); 「維摩經注解三卷 (竺道生)」《眾經目錄》卷 6 (CBETA, T55, no. 2146, p. 148, a13); 「維摩經注解五卷 (釋僧肇)」《眾經目錄》卷 6 (CBETA, T55, no. 2146, p. 148, a18)

<sup>700</sup> These fragments are reproduced in photo and transcribed by Zheng on pp. 108 - 130 of Zheng Acai 2018

<sup>701</sup> See on these texts Usuda Junzō 1977, Chi Limei 2001, *Ceng Xiaohong* 2008, p. 50, Zheng Acai 2018, pp. 125 - 127

<sup>702</sup> See Luo Zhenyu 1937, pp. 386 - 440

Both texts are incomplete and include only the first three chapters of Kumārajīva's version of the sūtra plus commentary. The sūtra text is written in large characters and Sengzhao's comments are inserted after the commented units in small characters on two lines; Sengzhao's entries are not introduced by the script "Sengzhao said" (*Zhao yue* 肇曰) which is used in the collective commentary for distinguishing the monk's comments from the others. Having compared the two manuscripts with the correspondent sections of the collective version from the Buddhist canon, Luo Zhenyu has pointed out that the manuscripts have preserved more than 160 lines which are absent from the canonic version; in the canonic version there are three entries by Sengzhao which have been erroneously attributed to Kumārajīva; in 3 cases Sengzhao's annotations present missing sentences 脫句; and in one case Sengzhao's annotations have been interpolated with annotations of unknown authorship<sup>704</sup>.

### 3.3 The *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 [T2777] by Daoye 道液 and related documents

Another fundamental text from Dunhuang related to the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* is the *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 (*Expository Commentary on the Guanzhong Annotated Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*) [T2777]<sup>705</sup>. This work was composed in 760 and then further revised in 765 (Tang dynasty) by the Tiantai monk Daoye 道液 of the Zisheng Temple 資聖寺 in Chang'an and was transmitted in 2 versions, one in 2 fascicles and one in 4.

This text was not recorded in the ancient Chinese catalogues, however we find it listed in those composed in the neighbouring countries. The royal Korean scholar-monk Ŭich'ŏn 義天 (1055 - 1101)<sup>706</sup>, who visited China from May 27, 1085 to August 2, 1086, registered it in his catalogue of East Asian Buddhist works *Sinp'yŏn chejong kyojang ch'ongnok* 新編諸宗教藏總錄 (*New Compilation of a Comprehensive Catalogue of the Doctrinal Repository of all the Schools*) (1090); four Japanese bibliographical works also mentioned it, namely the *Nittō shingu shōgyō mokuroku* 入唐新求聖教目錄 by the Tendai monk Ennin 圓仁 (794 - 864)<sup>707</sup>, the *Jōgyō oshō*

<sup>703</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 387

<sup>704</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 388

<sup>705</sup> This commentary is also known as *Jingming Guanzhong shu* 淨名經關中疏, *Jingming jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名集解關中疏, *Guanzhong jijie* 關中集解, *Jingming jing shu* 淨名經疏.

The text of this work has been collated by Li Ming 黎明 who corrected the numerous mistaken characters by comparing the different versions and fragments preserved. This "revised version" has been published in two parts on the review *Zangwai Fojiao wenxian* 藏外佛教文獻 (see Li Ming 1996, and Li Ming 1997). As Wang Jianjun 王建軍 has pointed out, this edition (which I have found on the whole very accurate and reliable) still presents some little mistakes; for example, in at least three cases the sūtra text and the commentary have been confused with one another (see Wang Jianjun 2011, pp. 20 - 21).

<sup>706</sup> For a brief account of Ŭich'ŏn's enterprise of collecting Chinese Buddhist texts and useful bibliography on the subject see Brose 2006. This article provides the following synthetic presentation of the monk and his activities: "Ŭich'ŏn, the fourth son of the Koryŏ king Munjong 文宗 (r. 1046 - 1083), traveled to China in 1085 with the intention of deepening his understanding of Huayan, but once in China also became interested in the doctrinal traditions of Tiantai. He began collecting texts from both traditions and by 1090 had assembled nearly 5000 scrolls. Later he used travelers and monks to gather another 1740 scrolls. In China Ŭich'ŏn was based out of the capital of Wuyue, Hangzhou, at Huiyin Temple 慧因寺, a monastery known for its Huayan learning. Not only is Ŭich'ŏn honored, along with his teacher Jingyuan 淨源 (1011 - 1088), with the revival of the Huayan tradition in China, but he is also recognized as the first patriarch of Korean Ch'ŏnt'ae" (*Ibidem*, p. 39)

<sup>707</sup> The Japanese monk Ennin 圓仁 (794 - 864) (posthumous name Jikaku Daishi 慈覺大師) was a favorite disciple of Saichō 最澄 (767 - 822), the founder of the Japanese Tendai school. The monk reached China in July 838 as a member of an official delegation led by the diplomat Fujiwara no Tsunetugu 藤原常嗣 (796 - 840) who had been sent as ambassador to the Chinese court. Ennin was not allowed (as he originally wished) to reach Mount Tiantai; hence he studied for some time in Yangzhou 揚州, and then at Wutai Shan 五臺山, and in the Tang capital Chang'an. During his travels he annotated the events occurred and his personal observations in the famous diary *Nittō Guhō Junrei Kōki* 入唐求法巡禮行記 (CBETA, [B 95]). The texts he collected in China and brought to Japan

*shōrai mokuroku* 常曉和尚請來目錄 [T2163] (839) by Jōgyō 常曉 (d. 865)<sup>708</sup>, the *Nihon biku Enchin nittō guhō mokuroku* 日本比丘圓珍入唐求法目錄 [T2172] by the Tendai monk Enchin 圓珍 (815-891)<sup>709</sup> and the *Tōiki dentō mokuroku* 東域傳燈目錄 (1094) by Eichō 永超 (1014 - 1095).

The preface to the commentary, written by Daoye himself, relates the “exegetical vicissitudes” the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* went through after the exegetical efforts of Kumārajīva and his disciples; moreover, it explains how and for what reasons he decided to compose his *Guanzhong shu*. Due to the importance of this document and its relevance for my inquiry, I translate here a large quote from it:

「[...] 羅什 [...] 重譯茲經及《法華》等。所以文切理詣，無間然矣。曰者傳習，多疎道、尚學，以膽 (read with variant 贍) 異端，致使大宗蕪蔓真極。而關中先製，言約旨深。將傳後進，或憚略而難通。蓋時移、識昧。豈先賢之闕歟？道液不揆庸淺，輒加裨廣。

“《淨名》以《肇注》作本；《法華》以《生疏》為憑。”然後傍求諸解，共通妙旨。雖述而不作，終愧亡羊者哉！于時上元元年歲次困頓，永泰初祀又於長安菩提道場夏再治定。庶法鏡轉明，惠燈益矣。」《淨名經集解關中疏》卷 1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2777, p. 440, a19-29)

[...] Kumārajīva retranslated this sūtra (i.e. the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*) and the *Lotus Sūtra*. Hence [their] words were [now] correct and the principle [they transmitted] was reached; they didn't contain any inconsistency. [However,] nowadays [those who] teach and learn [those scriptures] mostly distance themselves from the Way and devote themselves to [pure] scholarship, thus multiplying the erroneous views, to the point that an overgrowing weed caused the true supreme [doctrine] to lie waste. Instead, [the commentaries that were] formerly produced in Guanzhong [by Kumārajīva, Sengzhao etc.], had a simple language and a profound insight. When these [commentaries] are taught to the neophytes, some of them fear that, concise as they are, they are difficult to understand. [However,] this [is due to the fact that] the times have changed and the intellect [of the students nowadays] is not bright. How could this be considered a fault of those former sages? I [, Daoye], notwithstanding my mediocre faculties, have then added supplementary [explanations] enlarging [the commentary].

“As to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, [Seng]zhao's commentary is the most fundamental; [with regard to] the *Lotus Sūtra* [Dao]sheng's annotations are [the most valuable] support”; [hence I have used Sengzhao's commentary as the basis of my exegesis and] besides that I have searched for additional explanations, [so that] they together explain the marvelous insight [of the scripture]. Even though “I just relate [what others have said] without creating anything on my own”<sup>710</sup>, will I also end up “losing the sheep”<sup>711</sup> (i.e., missing the fundamental meaning due to an excessive sophistication in scholarship).

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are recorded in the three catalogues *Nihon koku jōwa go nen nittō guhō mokuroku* 日本國承和五年入唐求法目錄 [T2165], *Jikaku daishi zaitō sō shinroku* 慈覺大師在唐送進錄 [T2166], and *Nittō shingu shōgyō mokuroku* 入唐新求聖教目錄 [T2167]. Returned to Japan in 847, Ennin became the third abbot of Enryaku-ji on Mount Hiei 比叡山, outside of Kyōto.

<sup>708</sup> Jōgyō 常曉 (d. 865) was a Japanese monk of the Shingon School who had been trained in Kūkai. He reached China in the summer 838 with Ennin's same official delegation but on a different ship (the delegation, which counted in total 651 men, had left Japan in May on four different ships). He studied the esoteric teachings at the Qiling Monastery 栖靈寺 under the master Wencan 文璨 (a disciple of the famous Amoghavajra 不空). He returned to Japan three years later. In his *Catalogue* he listed the Buddhist sūtras he had acquired during his travels in China.

<sup>709</sup> Enchin traveled to China in 853. Unlike Ennin, he was able to reside and study in Tiantai. Here he profited from the well-stocked monastic libraries which were located in the Guoqing Temple 國慶寺 and the nearby Chanlin Temple 禪林寺 and collected a substantial number of texts which he brought back to Japan in 859 and registered in his catalogue (cf. Brose 2006, p. 50).

<sup>710</sup> This sentence is a *verbatim* quote from the *Confucian Analects*, *chapter 7*.

<sup>711</sup> The expression “to lose the sheep” (*wang yang* 亡羊) most likely refers to the apologue related in the *Shuo fu* *Chapt.* 說符 of the *Liezi* 列子 in which some people try to recapture a sheep that has escaped, but eventually fail because there are too many forks in the road and it would be impossible to search them all. The moral of the story is



[I have written this commentary] in 760, the year being in the *kundun* [cyclic combination]; then I have revised it and decided the final edition at the Bodhi-site of Chang'an in the summer 765. I hope that the mirror of the dharma will increase its brightness and the lamp of wisdom will [shine]<sup>712</sup> even more.

It clearly emerges from this quote that exegetical works on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* were produced in great number, and by Daoye's age the explanations they had elaborated had "overgrown" to the point of "infesting" the original meaning of the sūtra. The author praises the old-school Guanzhong exegesis for the clarity of its language and for its doctrinal depth, and this is the reason why he decided to make it the basis of his own commentary.

If we analyze Daoye's commentary, indeed we find out that the largest part of the exegetical apparatus provided by the author consists in a selection of annotations from Sengzhao, Kumārajīva and Daosheng's commentaries; we find also some annotations by Sengrui (which are not found in T1775)<sup>713</sup> and a few from the Tiantai sources introduced by the generic phrase "The Tiantai says..." (*Tiantai yun* 天台云)<sup>714</sup>. When needed, Daoye also inserted his own explanations, and parceled the text on the basis on his own "parceling method" (*kefen* 科分) which is on the whole simple and linear, mostly reflecting the logical articulation of the text itself; these additions were made in order to facilitate the comprehension of the Guanzhong exegesis which - as it is said in the preface - the students of those times might have found difficult to approach directly due to their weak intellect.

Daoye states that he has made Sengzhao's commentary the basis of his *Guanzhong shu*, and indeed Sengzhao's commentary is the most quoted; not only so, but Sengzhao's preface is also reproduced *in toto* right at the beginning of the commentary, immediately following Daoye's own brief introduction.

What is more important to stress for the present inquiry is that Daoye's work marked a re-discovery and popularization of the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* during the mid-Tang, after a period in which this had been somehow disregarded and "put aside"; the composition of the *Guanzhong shu* represents a key event in the long and complex process that would eventually culminated in the production of the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* in 10 fascicles.

More precisely, the *Guanzhong shu* is likely to have served as a model for the composition of the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* in 10 fascicles on the basis of a pre-existing version in 8 fascicles; based on the similarities between the two texts, some scholars have even suggested that Daoye could be the author of both of them. I will discuss these issues more in detail below, but for the time being we can get a better idea of the affinity between the

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that excessive sophistication in scholarship impedes to get to the essence of the teaching and leads inevitably to bewilderment.

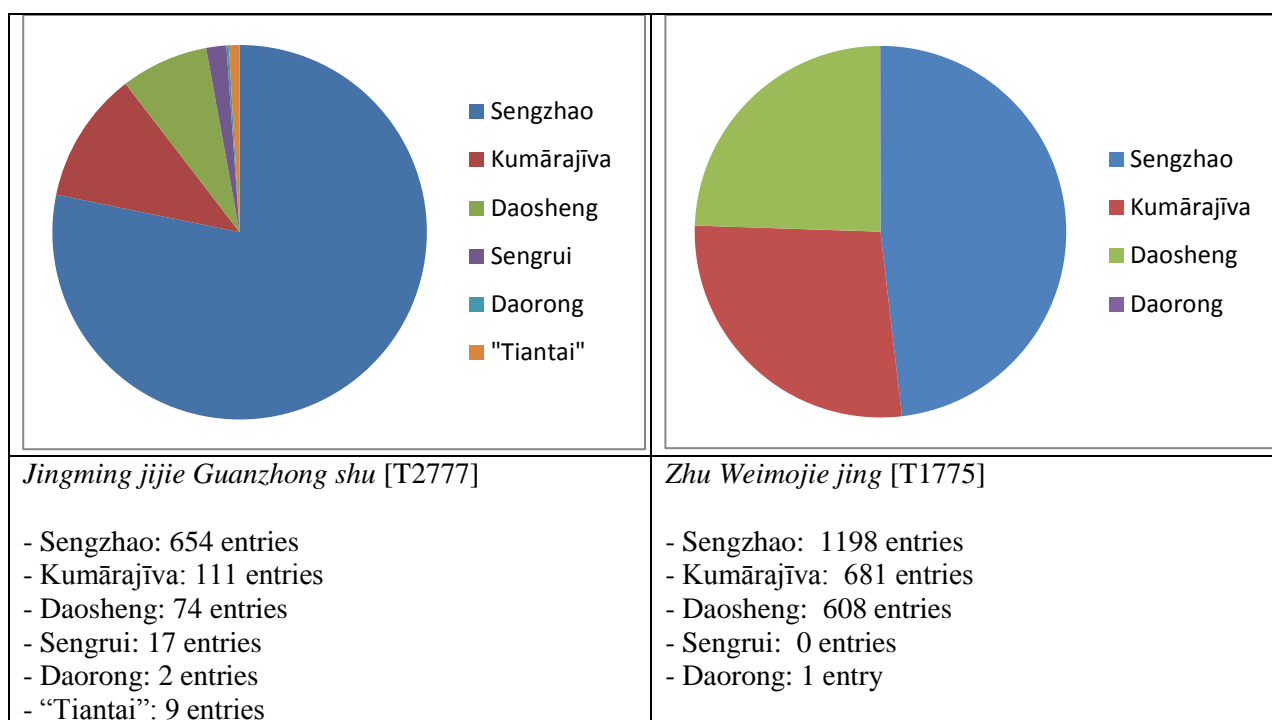
The expression could also refer to the story related in the *Pianmu* 駢拇 (*Webbed Toes*) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*: "The slave boy and the slave girl were out together herding their sheep, and both of them lost their flocks. Ask the slave boy how it happened: well, he had a bundle of writing slips and was reading a book. Ask the slave girl how it happened: well, she was playing a game of toss-and-wait-your-turn. They went about the business in different ways, but in losing their sheep, they were equal." (translation from Watson 2013, p. 63). Based on such story Daoye could have used the expression "*wang yang*" for expressing the fear to end up missing the fundamental meaning of the text as much as those he criticized for "distancing themselves from the Way and devoting themselves to [pure] scholarship" did.

<sup>712</sup> Li Ming's edition of the text adds in this sentence the character *zhao* 昭, "to shine", Cf. 「庶法鏡轉明，慧燈益照者矣。」《淨名經集解闡中疏卷上》卷 1 (CBETA, ZW02, no. 19, p. 177, a2)

<sup>713</sup> These annotations are not always faithfully reproduced; in fact, Daoye sometimes shortens or rearranges them on the basis on his own understanding.

<sup>714</sup> Li Ming claims that these quotes from the Tiantai sources are actually from Zhanran's 湛然 (711 - 782) texts (Cf. 「(CBETA, ZW02, no. 19, p. 175, a9-12); however, I couldn't find any evidence confirming such statement.

*Guanzhong shu* and *Zhu Weimojie jing* [T1775] through a comparison of the number of commentarial entries by the different commentators included in these texts:



As the diagram shows, in both works quotations from the old *Guanzhong* exegesis of the text form the main content. The ratio between the quotes from Sengzhao, Kumārajīva and Daosheng's commentaries in the two works is quite similar, Sengzhao's commentary being the most quoted<sup>715</sup>. Differences are found instead in the number of quotes from each commentator; it appears in fact that while Daoye selected only the explanations that he considered more useful, the editors of *Zhu Weimojie jing* aimed at fitting and reorganizing in a single text most of the materials originally belonging to the independent *Guanzhong* commentaries. As a matter of fact, *Zhu Weimojie jing* contains *exclusively* materials from the *Guanzhong* exegesis, while the *Guanzhong shu* includes also some additional materials (*viz.* the handful of quotes from the Tiantai exegesis and Daoye's own brief notes and his "analytic parsing" (*kepan* 科判), along with a few annotations by Sengrui that are not find in the other work).

Another aspect that deserves notice is that the aim of Daoye's work was primarily pedagogical and educational: he wanted to provide laymen and neophyte monks with a clear and simple exegesis that could help them approach the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and grasp its teachings, from here the choice to re-discover the *Guanzhong* exegesis. Daoye's high regard for the old *Guanzhong* exegesis is certainly related to the author's background as a translation-assistant, exegete and preacher<sup>716</sup>; expertise in the field of translation and in the exercise of the literal exegeses

<sup>715</sup> As it has been pointed out above, Daoye admittedly adopted Sengzhao's commentary as the basis of his exegesis, hence it is more than natural that this work is the most quoted. However, it must be reminded that Sengzhao's commentary was also most probably the most extended of the three commentaries (as we know from Fajing's 法經 (d.u.) *Zhongjing mulu* 眾經目錄 [T2146] (594) and Eichō's 永超 *Tōiki dentō mokuroku* 東域傳燈目錄 [T2183] (1094) it originally counted 5 fascicles, while Kumārajīva and Daosheng's ones were both in 3), and this would explain why it is the most quoted also in *Zhu Weimojie jing*.

<sup>716</sup> Little is known about Daoye. However, we find the monk involved in important translation projects, and in some exegetical and preaching activities in Chang'an. For example, in 765 he served as reviser for a new translation of the *Renwang jing* 仁王經 produced by Amoghavajra 不空 (705 - 774) (*the Renwang huguo bore jing* 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經 [T246]) and wrote a *shu* 疏 commentary in 2 fascicles on it. In 773 at Amoghavajra's request, together with Yuanying 元盈 he was ordered by the emperor to perennally preach on the new translation of the *Daji Daxu*

associated with it was not in the curriculum of the most renowned Buddhist masters of the Sui Dynasty who, rather than sticking to the literal meaning of the scriptures, ventured into the elaboration of a new kind of textual exegesis on which basis they could establish their own doctrines and lay the foundations of distinctively Chinese Buddhist sects.

It is no wonder that the result was an “overgrowth” of lengthy and often “intricate” commentaries, more and more characterized by the quest for erudition rather than for clarity and accessibility, and hence incomprehensible to a generic audience. This is precisely the reason why Daoye in his preface refers to the dichotomy between “pursuing the study (*viz.* erudition *per se*)” (*weixue* 為學) and “pursuing the Way” (*viz.* the religious path of spiritual advancement) (*weidao* 為道)<sup>717</sup>.

The high regard for the old-school Guanzhong exegesis showed in this work is evident also in Daoye’s other commentary on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* found at Dunhuang, namely the *Jingming jing Guanzhong shichao* 淨名經關中釋抄 [T2778] in 2 fascicles. This work starts with a brief introductory discussion of the sūtra based on Zhiyi’s “five layers of profound meaning” (*wu chong xuanyi* 五重玄義)<sup>718</sup>, then it provides a literal exegesis of Sengzhao’s preface to the sūtra (this section is titled “*shi xuwen*” 釋序文) which is followed by accurate biographic information on each of the Guanzhong commentators (namely, Kumārajīva, Sengzhao, Daosheng and Sengrui). After these introductory remarks, Daoye provides an exegesis of the sūtra chapter by chapter in which specific expressions used in the text are explained by the author, often through copious quotations from other sūtras and from the works of various Buddhist masters, including the Guanzhong exegetes.

Not only we know about Daoye’s re-discovery of the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* but, due to a fortunate coincidence, we also know something about the proselytizing activity carried on at the Zisheng Monastery based on it. In fact, the two manuscripts from Dunhuang *Weimo shu shi qian xiaoxu chao* 維摩疏釋前小序抄 [T2775] and the *Shi Zhao xu* 釋肇序 [T2776], which actually constitute two parts of the same document, contain annotations jotted down by a certain “śramaṇa Tiqing 體請 from the Chongfu Monastery 崇福寺” who attended one or more lectures on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* right at the Zisheng Monastery 資聖寺 of Chang’an during the years 766 - 767 (hence, just one year after Daoye’s

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*kongzang pusa suo wen jing* 大集大虛空觀菩薩所問經 (*The Great Collection Sūtra of the Questions of the Great Bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha*) [T404]; Yuanying had to preach at the Baoshou Monastery 保壽寺, and Daoye at the Ximing Monastery 西明寺. Each of the two monks had produced a written exegesis on that sūtra (see on this Yang Zeng 2018, p. 71 and p. 337).

In 788 at the Ximing Temple 西明寺 with other experts Daoye revised and polished the Chinese version of the *Da sheng liqu liu boluomiduo jing* 大乘理趣六波羅蜜多經 [T 261], whose text had been issued by the Kashmiri monk Prajñā 般若 (734 - ?) and orally translated by the monk from Kucha Liyan 利言 (Cf. T 261, p. 865, b2-13).

Daoye also composed a commentary on the *Diamond Sūtra* in 2 fascicles titled *Jingang bianzong* 金剛辨宗, of which a couple of entries survive in Zongmi’s 宗密 *Jingang bore jing shu lun zuanyao* 金剛般若經疏論纂要 [T1701]. These are introduced by the script *Zisheng yun* 資聖云.

It bears mention that the monastery to which Daoye belonged (the Zisheng si 資聖寺), built in 663 for Empress Wende 文德 (emperor Taizong’s wife), was in size and importance one of the major monasteries of the Tang capital Chang’an and like other temples as the Qinglong si 青龍寺, Zhangjing si 章敬寺 and Ximing si 西明寺 can be considered as having the status of “official temple” (*guansi* 官寺) (see on this Sun Changwu 1996, pp. 13, 20, 22).

<sup>717</sup> This is a clear allusion to the famous statement in *Laozi* 48: “who is in favor of study everyday has more, who is in favor of the Way everyday reduces more. He reduces and reduces again until he gets to non-interference. [Only when] non-interference [is achieved], then nothing will remain undone [...]” 為學日益，為道日損，以至於無為。無為，而無不為 [...]” (*Laozi* 48. Transl. from Wagner 2003 (a))

<sup>718</sup> Cf. 「今輒於文前撰五重玄義：第一，釋名；第二，出體；第三，明宗；第四，辯力用；第五，判教相。」《淨名經關中釋抄》卷 1 (CBETA, T85, no. 2778, p. 501, b12-14)

commentary was published in its final edition). The first part of these annotations is devoted to a careful exegesis of Daoye's preface to his *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 [T2777] which was delivered by the monk Qizhen 契真 of that monastery<sup>719</sup>; the second part (which starts in T2775 and continues in T2776)<sup>720</sup> contains the exegesis of Sengzhao's preface to the sūtra. Both texts are explained word-by-word (including function words etc.) with great philological accuracy; when needed, background historical and biographical information is provided in order to clarify expressions used in the text; both texts are parsed on the basis of a "sober" *kepan* 科判 which highlights the original argumentative structure. The features of this exegetical style perfectly match with Daoye's literal and linear explanation of the sūtra text which abstains from creative interpretation and personal doctrinal elaboration.

It is beyond doubt that Daoye's *Guanzhong shu* enjoyed a great popularity as a sort of primer for introducing the beginners to the study of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, something which is confirmed *inter alia* by the fact that it is one of the most reproduced works among the Dunhuang manuscripts<sup>721</sup>; some of those handwritten copies bear dates ranging from the mid to the late-Tang dynasty<sup>722</sup>.

Indeed, Daoye's work was highly influential from immediately after its composition throughout the Tang, and various masters wrote annotations on it and used them when lecturing on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. We know for example that the above mentioned Qizhen 契真 (aka "the śramaṇa Qizhen from the Zhongtiao Mountain" 中條山沙門契真) - whose oral exegesis was noted down by Tiqing - had authored a work named *Jingming jing Guanzhong shu shi wei* 淨名經關中疏釋微 (*Detailed explanation of [Daoye's] Jingming Guanzhong shu*) in 2 fascicles<sup>723</sup>, which probably served as a written support material for his lectures. Another text based on Daoye's *Guanzhong shu* was the *Guanzhong shu jiyi chao* 關中疏集義鈔 in 6 fascicles noted down by a certain Ling'an 令安<sup>724</sup>; and we also know about a couple of short texts outlining the bare parcelling structure of Daoye's text, namely the *Jingming Guanzhong shu lieshu yitu* 淨名經關中疏略數義圖 in 1 fascicle<sup>725</sup> and the [*Jingming jing*] *Guanzhong shu kewen* 關中疏科文 also in 1 fascicle<sup>726</sup>.

Some 70 years after its composition, Daoye's work was still widely circulating. As we learn from his famous diary *Nittō Guhō Junrei Kōki* 入唐求法巡禮行記 [B 95], in the November 838 Ennin (who at that time was based in Yangzhou 揚州, central Jiangsu Province) bought a copy

<sup>719</sup> According to Fang Guangchang the manuscripts from Dunhuang containing these two texts are four, namely: 1. S. 1347; 2. P. 2149 (the version of 維摩疏釋前小序抄 included in Taishō Tripitaka (i.e. T2775) is based on manuscripts 1 and 2., cf. 【原】佛蘭西國民圖書館藏燉煌本, P. 2149, 【甲】大英博物館藏燉煌本, S. 1347); 3. S. 2496 (the version of 釋肇序 included in the Taishō Tripitaka [T2776] is based on this manuscript, cf. 【原】大英博物館藏燉煌本, S. 2496, 首題新加【其中《釋肇斷序抄義》被吳定名為《釋肇序》】); 4. 北图 88 (cf. Fang Guangchang 1994, p. 151. For detailed information on these manuscripts see also Zeng Xiaohong 2008, pp. 164 - 169)

<sup>720</sup> Due to the corruption of the text, a short passage is missing between T2775 and T2776. Taking the text of Sengzhao's commentary as reference, the missing part goes from 觀感照[...] to [...]凡此眾說皆不思議之本也.

<sup>721</sup> See on this Zeng Xiaohong 2008. pp. 90 - 92

<sup>722</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 92

<sup>723</sup> Cf. the entries in Ennin and Eichō's catalogues: 「淨名經關中疏釋微二卷 (中修 (read as 條) 山沙門契真述)」《入唐新求聖教目錄》卷 1 (CBETA, T55, no. 2167, p. 1086, b3-4); 「同 (i.e. 淨名) 關中疏釋微二卷 (中修 (read as 條) 山契真述)」《東域傳燈目錄》卷 1 (CBETA, T55, no. 2183, p. 1151, c17-18).

<sup>724</sup> This work is registered in Ūich'ōn's 義天 catalogue, cf. 「關中疏集義鈔六卷 令安述」《新編諸宗教藏總錄》卷 1 (CBETA, T55, no. 2184, p. 1170, a7)

<sup>725</sup> This work is registered in Enchin's 圓珍 (815 - 891) catalogue, cf. 「淨名經關中疏略數義圖一卷」《開元寺求得經疏記等目錄》卷 1 (CBETA, T55, no. 2169, p. 1092, b4)

<sup>726</sup> This work is registered in Eichō's catalogue, cf. 「同關中疏科文一卷 (同上)」《東域傳燈目錄》卷 1 (CBETA, T55, no. 2183, p. 1151, c15-16)

of the *Guanzhong shu* for 450 copper coins<sup>727</sup>. Moreover, as he relates, three months earlier (September 838) while still residing at the Kaiyuan Monastery 開元寺 of Yangzhou (one of the largest monasteries in the city), he had heard about (or possibly even met) an old master named Wenxi 文襲 living in the nearby Wuliang yi Monastery 無量義寺 who lectured on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* using his own annotations based on Daoye's commentary as a sort of textbook. As Ennin tells in his diary:

「九月一日。無異事。從開元寺西涉河有無量義寺。有老僧名文襲，春秋七十。新作《維摩經記》五卷。今現在堂裏講其疏記，多用肇、生、融、天台等義。比寺諸僧來集聽之。聽眾都有卅八人。共敬重彼文襲和尚。」《入唐求法巡禮行記》卷 1 (CBETA, B18, no. 95, p. 12, b1-4)

September 23. Nothing special occurred. To the West across the river from the Kaiyuan Monastery is located the Wuliang yi Monastery. [Here] there is a monk named Wenxi who is 70 years old. He has composed a new work [titled] *Annotations on [Daoye's] Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* in 5 fascicles<sup>728</sup>. He currently lectures on those annotations in the [lecture] hall; he mostly uses [Seng]zhao, [Dao]sheng, [Dao]rong and the Tiantai interpretations (this no doubt refers to the entries of Daoye's commentary introduced by "Tiantai yue" 天台曰). The monks of neighbouring monasteries come and gather to listen to him. The audience is composed of 38 people who all revere that monk Wenxi.

We find the *Annotations* by the old monk Wenxi registered in Jōgyō's catalogue of Buddhist scriptures (the Japanese monk reached China in 836 and completed his catalogue in 839). It is included in a list of seven commentarial works on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*<sup>729</sup>, three of which are authored by Daoye. These entries are followed by an annotation by the compiler which well functions as a conclusion to this section devoted to Daoye's writings and the revival of the old Guanzhong exegesis they fostered under the Tang:

「右，維摩經。[...] 近代興盛講文、學義之類。總此疏等以為指南。是故，每寺講《淨名典》，化度白衣，以液公疏，提撕緇徒，皆云：“雖有諸師註疏，慧底未足。乍學此文，法鏡轉明，慧燈益照者。”」《常曉和尚請來目錄》卷 1 (CBETA, T55, no. 2163, p. 1069, c2-9)

<sup>727</sup> In his diary Ennin relates in great detail his purchase, and the mention of the prize he paid for the book leads him to report a curious fact related to that: “On November 22 [of the year 838] I bought [a copy of Daoye's] *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* (*Weimo Guanzhong shu* 維摩關中疏) in 4 fascicles for the price of 450 [copper] coins. An edict has been issued putting a ban on copper: it is not allowed for the people of the empire to commercialize it. They say that there has been [such prohibition] as a rule once every 6 years. [This is because the state] worries that the people of the empire continue using copper for producing utensils, and that [in such way] there will not be enough of it for minting coins. This is why [copper] has been banned”. 「十一月二日。買維摩關中疏四卷，價四百五十文。有勅斷銅，不許天下賣買。說六年一度，例而有之。恐天下百姓一向作銅器，無銅鑄錢。所以禁斷矣。」《入唐求法巡禮行記》卷 1 (CBETA, B18, no. 95, p. 15, a6-8). As we know from the official historical sources, “the Tang court tried to control counterfeiting by banning metal sales at the source and by stopping circulation in the market” (on these Tang monetary policies - which in the end obtained little or no result - see Tan Mei Ah 2017 (in particular p. 80)).

<sup>728</sup> Ennin, Jōgyō and Eichō have all recorded this work in their respective catalogues, cf. 「淨名經記五卷 (無量義寺文襲述)」《入唐新求聖教目錄》卷 1 (CBETA, T55, no. 2167, p. 1086, b1-2); 「維摩經開 (read as 關) 中疏記一部五卷 (文襲禪師造)」《常曉和尚請來目錄》卷 1 (CBETA, T55, no. 2163, p. 1069, b25-26); 「同[ i.e.淨名]關中疏記五卷 (無量義寺大(read as 文) 襲撰)」《東域傳燈目錄》卷 1 (CBETA, T55, no. 2183, p. 1151, c18-19)

<sup>729</sup> These seven commentarial works are: 1. 「維摩經疏一部四卷 (開中 (read as 關中) 道液法師造); 2. 維摩經釋批 (read as 抄) 一部三 (read with variant 二) 卷 (開中 (read as 關中) 道液法師造); 3. 維摩經開中 (read as 關中) 疏記一部五卷 (文襲禪師造); 4. 維摩經略例一部二卷 (智深法師造); 5. 維摩經玄旨一卷 (漢涌法師造); 6. 維摩經開 (read as 關) 中疏科文一卷 (開 (read as 關) 中道液法師造); 7. 維摩經五教義一卷 (文襲禪師造)」《常曉和尚請來目錄》卷 1 (CBETA, T55, no. 2163, p. 1069, b23-c1)

[The works listed] on the right [are all related to the] *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* [...] In the modern era [practices] like those of reciting the scriptures and studying their meaning have become very popular, and [when explaining the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*] these commentaries [I have listed] always serve as a guide.

For this reason, in all temples when they preach the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* they adopt [Dao]ye's commentary for converting the laymen and for instructing the monks<sup>730</sup>. [Laymen and monks] all say: "Even though commentaries by many different masters are available, [our] wisdom is still insufficient [to understand them]. But as soon as we study this text (i.e. Daoye's commentary)<sup>731</sup> the mirror of the dharma turns brighter and the lamp of wisdom shines even more".

#### 4. Shelving the old Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* under the Sui

The *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 and related sources considered above all sketch a clear picture: the appearance of a new elaborate exegetical approach at some point caused the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* to temporarily fall into oblivion, or at least step back from the official scenes. But when, how and why did this happen? Did the Guanzhong interpretation spontaneously "fade", or was it wittingly discarded in favor of the new commentarial works? The discussion of these issues can help us better understand the revival of the Guanzhong exegesis described above and its historical premises.

As it appears from the sources, eminent Sui masters like Jizang 吉藏 (549 - 623) (founder of the Three Treatises School) and Zhiyi 智顗 (538 - 597) (founder of the Tiantai School) had in fact already driven away from the old-school exegesis, a choice which had a great impact on the Buddhist studies of their time, also considered the fact that both monks belonged to the highest Buddhist intelligentsia and enjoyed the favor and support of the the King of Jin 晉王 Yang Guang 楊廣 (569 - 618) who would become emperor in 604 with the name of Yangdi 煬帝.

As to Jizang, his dissatisfaction for the old exegesis clearly emerges from the preface to one of his own commentaries to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, the *Jingming Xuanlun* 淨名玄論 [T1780]<sup>732</sup> (written in his old age, probably in 599<sup>733</sup>). In this work he claims that

「昔“僧叡、僧肇悟發天真。道融、道生神機秀拔”。並加妙思，具析幽微。而意極清玄，辭窮麗藻。但斯經，文約義富，意遠義深。略闡未彰，廣敷似現<sup>734</sup>。故博採南北，摭拾古今。復檢經論，微加檀思。實有過半之功，庶免徒勞之弊。」《淨名玄論》卷 1 (CBETA, T38, no. 1780, p. 853, a11-16)

In the past, "Sengrui and Sengzhao discovered the Natural Truth [of Buddhist doctrine] [while] Daorong and Daosheng were endowed with an outstanding extraordinary intelligence". They all applied their careful thinking and minutely analyzed the mysterious subtleties; their mind raised up to the pure mystery and their words were the most refined and exquisite. However, this sūtra is compact and rich in meaning, its implications are far-reaching and its insight so deep. If one explains it concisely [its meaning] will no be fully manifest, and only with an extended exposition it seems to become evident. Hence, I have collected the Northern and Southern

<sup>730</sup> In the original text (which is on the whole very corrupt) the sentence 以液公疏 is in my opinion misplaced and should be moved after 《淨名典》. This is the reading adopted in my English translation.

<sup>731</sup> It seems that here the author is referring specifically to Daoye's *Guanzhong shu*, given that he thereafter reproduces almost *verbatim* the last words of its introduction.

<sup>732</sup> Jizang authored three commentaries on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, namely the *Jingming xuanlun* 淨名玄論 [T1780] in 38 fascicles, the *Weimojing yishu* 維摩經義疏 [T1781] (in 38 fascicles) and the *Weimojing lieshu* 維摩經略疏 [X 343] in 19 fascicles.

<sup>733</sup> Cf. Guo Zhaoshun 2017, pp. 47 - 48

<sup>734</sup> Cf. a similar expression used by Jizang in *Zhongguan lun shu* 中觀論疏: 「略釋難明，廣敷乃現。」《中觀論疏》卷 2 〈因緣品 1〉 (CBETA, T42, no. 1824, p. 20, a22-24)



[explanations] in great number and gathered ancient and modern [interpretations]; moreover, I have consulted [many] sūtras and commentaries, and pondered on them for some time. As a matter of fact, [by providing such exegetical apparatus] I have already made [on behalf of the reader] more than half of the effort [he would] need for understanding [the sūtra], I hope I have spared him a fruitless struggle.

In Jizang's opinion, the Guanzhong exegesis was not explicit enough and needed to be integrated with other explanations. As a matter of fact, his commentary is characterized by an abundance of quotations from various sources and reaches the impressive size of 38 fascicles (while if we sum up the fascicles of Kumārajīva, Sengzhao and Daosheng's independent commentaries we reach the number of 11). This approach is based on the idea that the exegete has to contextualise the sūtra in the broader background of the Buddhist revelation: with the years, new scriptures introduced from India had progressively unfolded in an increasingly direct and un-mediated (or, as we might say, less expediential) way higher levels of truth, and it was from this higher perspective that one should address the earlier scriptures. Jizang believed that, not having witnessed the "second vague" of fundamental Mahāyāna sūtras introduced to China starting from the second decade of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Guanzhong exegets could not fully fathom the Buddhist truth and could only vaguely sense it. He says in his commentary:

「問：生、肇、融、叡，並注《淨名》。何故不作此釋？答：其人非無斯意，但于時經論未備，故義不分明。問：云何未備？答：《涅槃》、《華嚴》、《勝鬘》[...]皆晚傳此土」《淨名玄論》卷7 (CBETA, T38, no. 1780, p. 903, b25-29)

**Question:** [Dao]sheng, [Seng]zhao, [Dao]rong and [Seng]rui all commented the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Why is it that [in this case] you don't use such explanation? **Answer:** "It is not that they didn't explain this meaning [on this point], but since at their time many [fundamental] sūtras and śāstras were not yet available, their explanation is not fully clear.

**Question:** What do you mean with "not available"? **Answer:** Scriptures like the *Nirvāṇasūtra*, the *Āvataṃsakasūtra*, the *Śrīmālā-siṃha-nāda-sūtra* [etc...] were all transmitted to this land in later times [...]

In Zhiyi's case, the turning away from the old Guanzhong exegesis is even more evident and the consequences of his choice even more far-reaching. Years before Jizang, the monk had composed on official request new commentaries on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* which were submitted to the Crown Prince Yang Guang<sup>735</sup>. These works were based on the complex and highly elaborate exegetical patterns the monk had developed when commenting upon the *Lotus Sūtra*<sup>736</sup>. In particular, he adopted as a general guideline the "Five Layers of the Profound Meaning" (*wuchong xuanyi* 五重玄義), i.e. Name (*ming* 名), Substance (*ti* 體), Gist (*zong* 宗), Function (*yong* 用), and Teaching (*jiao* 教) and articulated his analysis of these categories on the two different levels of "General Interpretation" (*tongshi* 通釋) and "Specific Interpretation" (*bieshi*

<sup>735</sup> According to the Japanese scholar Satō Tetsuei, Zhiyi submitted his *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentaries* to Yang Guang 楊廣 in three distinct occasions: 1. During the 6<sup>th</sup>~7<sup>th</sup> month of the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the Kaihuang era 開皇 (595) the monk submitted a *Xuanyi* (*Profound Meaning [Interpretation]*) 玄義 in 10 fascicles. Under the Tang this work was divided into *Sixi Tanyi* 四悉檀義 (now lost), *Sanguan yi* 三觀義 and *Sijiao yi* 四教義 (both preserved) (cf. 《法華文句記》卷1〈釋序品〉 (CBETA, T34, no. 1719, p. 159, b13-16); 2. During the 3<sup>rd</sup>~4<sup>th</sup> month of the 17<sup>th</sup> year of the Kaihuang era 開皇 (597) he submitted a *Xuanshu* (*Profound Commentary*) 玄疏 in 6 fascicles and a *Wenshu* (*Textual Explanation*) 文疏 in 8 fascicles. Since Zhiyi was not fully satisfied with these two works, they got destroyed after a new version of them was produced; 3. In a third occasion he submitted a revised version of the *Xuanshu* in 6 fascicles and of the *Wenshu* in 25 fascicles. The last part of this last work was completed by the disciple Guanding 灌頂 upon Zhiyi's death, thus reaching the number of 28 fascicles. These two works are still preserved (see Satō Tetsuei 1961, pp. 420 - 428 and Guo Zhaoshun 2017, p. 47).

<sup>736</sup> This is Zhiyi's magnum opus, the *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra* (*Miaofa lianhua jing xuanyi* 妙法蓮華經玄義 [T1716]). For an introduction to this complex text, see SHEN Haiyan 2011.

別釋), the former presenting the “Five Layers” as the legitimate exegetical categories for interpreting the sūtra, and the latter explaining the “Five Layers” one by one. The result is a complex work which goes far beyond textual interpretation, and uses instead exegesis as a medium for articulating a philosophical system and exposing a comprehensive vision of Buddhism in which every sūtra occupies a precise position. The comment David Chappell made on Zhiyi’s *Lotus Sūtra Commentary* certainly holds true also for the monk’s works on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*:

Zhiyi’s *Xuanyi* was totally interpretative and did not follow the individual chapters at all - a very different hermeneutical orientation from that of the textual exegesis that had been the dominant method of Canonical Buddhism in the fifth and sixth centuries when the central aims were accuracy, authenticity and comprehensiveness<sup>737</sup>.

This exegesis, which was instrumental in laying the philosophical foundations of the Tiantai Buddhist School, was soon strongly supported by the Sui Crown Prince Yang Guang 楊廣 who - as it seems - “institutionalized” it with very important consequences. How did this happen?

We know from various official sources that in the year 602 in Daxing cheng 大興城 (i.e. Chang’an) the two monks Daozhuang 道莊 (525 - 605) and Falun 法論 (d.u.)<sup>738</sup> (both originally from the Huiji Temple 慧日道場 in Yangzhou 揚州) were ordered to preach on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in the Eastern Palace, viz. the residence of the Crown Prince Yang Guang; all the sources stress the fact that they had to “use *entirely* Zhizhe’s (= Zhiyi’s) *Commentary* for explaining the sūtra text”<sup>739</sup>.

Probably this apparently trivial matter constitutes an important evidence of the official dismissal of the old Guanzhong exegesis in favor of the new interpretative one. This is suggested by a preface written by the Japanese Tendai monk Shu’un 秀雲 of Mount Hiei 比叡山 to a Genroku 元祿 (1688 - 1703) edition of Zhanran’s *Weimo jing shuji* 維摩經疏記 (X 340), an important sub-commentary in 3 fascicles to Zhiyi’s *Weimo jing wenshu* 維摩經文疏. Even though this document - which has been reproduced in the Taishō Tripiṭaka (X 340, p. 870 c15- p. 872 a06) - is a late one (it dates 1701), it seems nevertheless that the information related is reliable due to the coherence with the historical sources mentioned above and the abundance of accurate quotations from many early Tiantai texts attesting a well documented knowledge of the historical vicissitudes related.<sup>740</sup>

<sup>737</sup> Chappell 1988, p. 184

<sup>738</sup> See the respective biographies in *Xu gaoseng zhuan* [T2060], p. 499, c14-p. 500, a6 and *Ibidem*, p. 500, a7-28.

<sup>739</sup> See for example the *Guoqing bailu* 國清百錄: “**Memorial in which the Crown Prince [Yang Guang] promotes [Zhiyi’s] *Jingming shu*** [...] The Mentor of the Right (i.e. the deputy chief of staff) Zhang Heng has announced this order: “The two monks from the Huiji Monastery Daozhuang (here mistakenly written as Huizhuang 慧莊) and Falun will lecture on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in the Eastern Palace (i.e. the part of the imperial residence traditionally reserved to the crown prince) using *entirely* Zhizhe’s *Commentary* for explaining the sūtra text. Twice a day [the crown prince] will personally attend [the lecture] [...]”. 「皇太子弘淨名疏書[...] 右庶子張衡宣令: “慧日道場僧慧莊、法論二師, 於東宮講淨名經。全用智者《疏》判釋經文。一日兩時, 躬親臨聽。」《國清百錄》卷3 (CBETA, T46, no. 1934, p. 814, c10-12). This fact is reported also in *Xu gaoseng zhuan* [T2060], p. 584, c7-10 and in *Tiantai jiuzu zhuan* 天台九祖傳 [T2069], p. 101, a25-29.

<sup>740</sup> It must be remembered that the libraries of the temples on Mount Hiei 比叡山 stocked a very substantial collection of Chinese Tiantai texts and documents. As Brose explained, “even without taking into account the various texts that may have been unofficially transmitted to Japan, the catalogues of Saichō, Ennin, Ensai, and Enchin alone are enough to establish that a substantial collection of Chinese Tiantai texts was preserved in Japan by the mid-tenth century” (Brose, p. 50). After a great part of these texts had gone lost in China due to wars and disorders, they were re-introduced from Japan in the 10<sup>th</sup> century; this fostered a revival of the Tiantai doctrinal tradition (the whole sequence of events is reconstructed by Brose).

Shu'un's preface relates Zhiyi's opinion that the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, which was later followed also by the Southern Chen and Liang masters, mostly relied on the "Common Teaching" (*tongjiao* 通教)<sup>741</sup>, and for this reason it could hardly be trusted. Instead Zhiyi's interpretation was based on the "Complete Teaching" (*yuanjiao* 圓教)<sup>742</sup> and for the first time revealed the true meaning of the text. After quoting the opinions of other Tiantai masters, Shu'un reports that

緬懷有隋煬帝潛龍之時，闍什、肇注，請智者疏。大師滅後，[...]逮登儲貳宣令慧日道場道莊、法論二師於東宮，講《淨名》不據關注，全用《台疏》判釋經文，副君臨聽，以為心要。《維摩經疏記》卷 1 (CBETA, X18, no. 340, p. 871, c1-5 // Z 1:28, p. 361, b16-c2 // R28, p. 721, b16-p. 722, a2)

It is remembered how before becoming the Sui [emperor] Yangdi, [Yang Guang] had dismissed Kumārajīva and Sengzhao's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* and invited Zhizhe to comment the scripture [again]<sup>743</sup>. After the death of the Great Master [Zhiyi] [...] the Crown Prince awaiting enthronement ordered that Daozhuang and Falun of the Huiji Monastery preach on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in the Eastern Palace (i.e. Yangdi's residence) not relying on the Guan[zhong] commentary but using *entirely* the Tiantai *Commentary* [by Zhiyi] for explaining the scripture. The Crown Prince [personally] attended [the preaching], considering it as the most important teaching.

As we learn from this passage, Yang Guang's 楊廣 order that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* be explained on the basis of Zhiyi's commentary implied the abandonment of the Guanzhong exegesis (hence, the adverb "*entirely*" used in the sources should be rather understood as "*exclusively*").

Yang Guang was proclaimed Crown Prince in the eleventh month of the year 600 and shortly thereafter moved his household from Yangzhou to the imperial capital Daxing cheng 大興城 (i.e. Chang'an). Once there, he accommodated many eminent monks from the South at the Riyan Temple 日嚴寺 which was built on his orders in the South-east end of the capital sometime between 592 and 597 (cf. Wang Yarong 1999, p. 194); among them were Jizang and the above mentioned Daozhuang and Falun. The Riyan Temple (whose hosted clerics were almost entirely from the South) became instrumental in spreading the Southern exegesis to the North<sup>744</sup>.

Given these premises, it becomes clear that the switch in the exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* described by Shu'un was but a move in the complex "game" of re-organization and centralization of religion following the re-unification of the Chinese empire (589 AD).

It is easy to imagine how the establishment of Zhiyi's reading as a sort of "official interpretation" had an impact on the circulation of the manuscripts of the old Guanzhong exegesis which ended up falling into oblivion for one and a half centuries. The situation met by Daoye around the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century, in which the overgrowth of an excessively elaborate exegesis had

<sup>741</sup> Cf. 「智者大師不言乎？若尋什師、生、肇注維摩，同用通意。陳、梁諸法師，講此經文，今家往望，皆是用通教意釋此經耳」《維摩經疏記》卷 1 (CBETA, X18, no. 340, p. 871, b19-21 // Z 1:28, p. 361, b10-12 // R28, p. 721, b10-12). This is a literal, albeit slightly abridged, quote from Zhiyi's works. Cf. *Weimojing shu* 維摩經玄疏 [T1777], p. 538, b23-26 and *Sijiao yi* 四教義 [T1929], p. 751, c13-16.

<sup>742</sup> The Tiantai classification of Buddhist teachings was divided into four periods, i.e. the Pīṭaka [school] (*zang* 藏), the common [teachings of Hinayāna and Mahāyāna] (*tong* 通), the distinctive [Mahāyāna teachings] (*bie* 別), and the perfect or complete [Mahāyāna teachings] (*yuan* 圓). The "common teaching" or "intermediate teaching" (*tongjiao* 通教) indicated an intermediate doctrinal system between the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna which held the doctrine of the Void but did not yet make plain the Buddha's whole truth.

<sup>743</sup> Zhiyi wrote this commentary in 595 while residing at the Chanzhong Monastery 禪眾寺 of Yangzhou, where he had been invited by the King of Jin 晉王 Yang Guang 楊廣 (who would become emperor Yang in the year 604).

<sup>744</sup> At the capital city the Southern monks not only spread the commentarial works and doctrinal elaborations produced in the South but also revived the practice of oral debate which had represented a potent motor for the evolution of exegesis under the Southern Dynasties (see on this Wang Yarong 1999, p. 199 - 200).

obscured the “original truth” of the text, must have initiated during the Sui times with Jizang and Zhiyi’s new commentaries.

## 5. Pre-Tang collective editions of the Guanzhong *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* and hypotheses on their origin<sup>745</sup>

Having analyzed the Dunhuang and Turfan sources related to the Guanzhong *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* and having investigated the historical background of some of them, let us now focus again on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* itself and its editing process.

As I have pointed out in 3.1, the collective editions of the *Commentary* gained prominence starting from the Tang and soon supplanted the various independent commentaries. While these “successful” collective versions were probably edited under the Tang, there is evidence that compilations of the Guanzhong commentaries on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* already existed much earlier. What do we know about these early editions of the text? When were they possibly produced, and by whom?

As we have seen in the above section, the Sui Buddhist masters were well acquainted with the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, which they often quoted and assessed in their own works. At a close investigation, it seems that the version of the scripture they used was a collective one.

When orally delivering his magnum opus, the *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀 during the year 594<sup>746</sup>, Zhiyi (538 - 597) used to quote from an early version assembling Kumārajīva, Sengzhao and Daoshen’s commentaries. In fact, in fascicle 10 of his work at a certain point he lists the names and theories of the Six Tīrthikas, or Heterodox Teachers, specifying that “this [explanation] comes from Kumārajīva’s commentary” (“此出《羅什疏》”),<sup>747</sup> and there is little doubt that he is referring to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* (chapter 3, *Dizi pin* 弟子品). Proceeding with his examination of the Tīrthikas, only slightly below in the text, he quotes from a text he calls *Guanzhong shu*:

「《關中疏》云：“一師各有三種法：一，得一切智法；二，得神通法；三，得韋陀法。”」《摩訶止觀》卷 10 (CBETA, T46, no. 1911, p. 132, c20-21)

The *Guanzhong shu*<sup>748</sup> says: “There are three categories for each Heterodox Teacher: those who obtained omniscience, those who obtained supernatural powers (abijñā), those who obtained [all the knowledge contained in] the Vedas”

This quote corresponds to Kumārajīva’s commentary in T1775<sup>749</sup>. The fact that Zhiyi had previously specified that “this [explanation] comes from Kumārajīva’s commentary” suggests that, dealing with a collective commentary, he felt the need to point out whose explanation he

<sup>745</sup> This topic has been previously dealt with by Hanazuka (cf. Hanazuka 1982, pp. 207 - 211); the Japanese scholar had collected the materials from works by Zhiyi, Jizang, Zhanran and Chikō which I quote here. In this section I reexamine those sources, add new ones, and enrich the discussion on the topic by providing additional information (e.g. on the Buddhist editorial activities undertaken under Liang Wudi and on Chikō’s doctrinal background and his exegetical activity).

<sup>746</sup> The content of this text was orally delivered by Zhiyi (538 - 597) and then transcribed by his disciple Guanding 灌頂 (561 - 627).

<sup>747</sup> Cf. *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀 [T1911], p. 132, b12-19

<sup>748</sup> It must be pointed out that before the Tang the term *Guanzhong shu* 關中疏 indicated two different texts, i.e. the collective *Annotated Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (this is the case in our quote) and the *Nirvāṇasūtra Commentary* by Daosheng 道生 (Cf. Guanding’s 灌頂 *Niepanjing xuanyi wenju* 涅槃經玄義文句 [X656], p. 40, a23-b4 // Z 1:56, p. 179, d12-17 // R56, p. 358, b12-17)

<sup>749</sup> Cf. *Zhu Weimojiejing* 注維摩詰經 [T1775], p. 351, a13-19

was quoting. This interpretation is confirmed by Zhanran who, commenting upon Zhiyi's text, clarifies:

「言“出羅什疏”等者，什公無別《淨名疏》，但有與生、肇等諸德注經。今文所用義，兼生、肇，將彼所釋，以望《大經》。」《止觀輔行傳弘決》卷 10 (CBETA, T46, no. 1912, p. 436, b6-8)

The reason why the text says “this [explanation] comes from Kumārajīva's commentary” is that there is no separate *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* by Kumārajīva; there is only a version assembling it together with the annotations of the two worthies [Dao]sheng and [Seng]zhao.<sup>750</sup> The interpretation used in this text takes together [Dao]sheng and [Seng]zhao's explanations<sup>750</sup> and uses their interpretation for looking at (=comparing it to that found in the) the *Great Sūtra* (viz. the *Nirvāṇasūtra*).

Evidently, by Zhiyi's times a collective version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* already existed and circulated among the exegete monks. It is no wonder that another eminent Sui master contemporaneous with Zhiyi, Jizang 吉藏, also saw this work and mentioned it in one of his writings. In the introduction of his *Expository Commentary to the Lotus Sūtra* 法華義疏 [T1721] he explains the differences between commentarial formats in India and China, some of which parceled the sūtra text and some others just explained it in its entirety. He says:

[...] 尋天竺之與震旦，著筆之與口傳，敷經講論者，不出二種：一者科章門，二者直解釋。如天親解《涅槃》有七分，龍樹釋《般若》無章門，蓋是天竺論師開、不開之二類也。河西製《涅槃疏》開為五門，道融講新《法華》類為九轍，至如集解淨名之說、撰注法華之文，但拆其玄微，又不豫科起盡，蓋是震旦諸師開、不開兩義也。[...]」  
《法華義疏》卷 1 〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T34, no. 1721, p. 452, b16-23)

[...] If we inquire about the methods [by which] the Buddhist scriptures are explained and commented upon [also] by comparing the Indian and Chinese [approaches], written record and oral transmission, we find out that there are but two kinds, namely: [explanations] parceling the sūtra text, and direct explanations [without parceling].

For example, Vasubandhu explained the *Nirvāṇasūtra* by dividing it into seven sections, and Nāgārjuna [instead] explicated the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* without parceling it: this is the Indian way of commenting through parceling or not parceling the text.

When the master from Hexi [Daolang 道朗] produced the *Nirvāṇasūtra Commentary*, he divided [the text into] five sections, and Daorong<sup>751</sup> when lecturing on the new [translation of the] *Lotus sūtra* divided [the text] into “nine tracks”; [instead], as to [exegetical works] like the *Collection of Annotations on the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and the composition of the *Annotated Lotus sūtra*, they just disclose the mysterious subtleties [of the scripture] without actually parceling the text<sup>752</sup>. This is how the Chinese masters comment [a text] by parceling or not parceling it [...]

Commenting this passage in his *Fahua jing shu yizuan* 法華經疏義攷 [X594], Zhidu 智度 (Tang dynasty) makes it even more clear which the two texts last quoted by Jizang are. He says:

<sup>750</sup> In an abridged and revised version of his commentary (the *Zhiguan fuxing souyao ji* 止觀輔行搜要記), Zhanran corrected this sentence in “[...] uses Kumārajīva's explanation for looking at the *Great Sūtra* (viz. the *Nirvāṇasūtra*)” 「將什公所譯 (read as 釋)，以望大經」《止觀輔行搜要記》卷 10 (CBETA, X55, no. 919, p. 857, a23 // Z 2:4, p. 226, a12 // R99, p. 451, a12), which evidently makes much more sense.

<sup>751</sup> Almost certainly a mistake for “Sengrui” 僧叡, to whom the division of the *Lotus sūtra* into “nine tracks” is actually attributed by the ancient sources (see for example Fayun's 法雲 (467 - 529) *Fahua yiji* 法華經義記 [T1715], p. 572, a17-18, Zhiyi's *Miaofa lianhua jing wenju* 妙法蓮華經文句 [T1718], p. 114, c21-24, and Jizang's *Fahua xuanlun* 法華玄論 [T1720], p. 363, c11-12).

<sup>752</sup> Cf. also Zhiyi's statement in *Renwang huguo boruo jing shu* 仁王護國般若經疏: “Liu Qiu just articulated the explanation following the [sūtra] text [without parceling it]” 「劉虬但隨文解釋。」《仁王護國般若經疏》卷 1 〈序品 1〉 (CBETA, T33, no. 1705, p. 255, b17-18)

「如四子《注淨名》、劉虬《注法華》，皆亦不分章。故云：“不識起盡”」《法華經疏義續》卷 1 (CBETA, X29, no. 594, p. 7, a16-17 // Z 1:45, p. 191, a13-14 // R45, p. 381, a13-14)

[Works] like the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* by the Four [Guanzhong] Masters and the *Lotus Sūtra Commentary* by Liu Qiu 劉虬 do not parcel the text into [smaller] units. That is why [Jizang] says: “they do not use the parceling [method]”.

Having shown that a collective edition of the Guanzhong *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentaries* (one or maybe more editions of it) already existed during the Sui dynasty, we might now address the problem of how early such text could have possibly been created, how it was edited and by whom. Given that information on these matters is extremely scanty, we can only speculate on it: I will provide here two hypotheses, the second one resting on more solid ground than the first.

### First hypothesis (composition took place under the Southern Qi)

If for a moment we turn away from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and focus instead on the *Lotus Sūtra*, we find out that, according to a very early source, “under the [Southern] Qi 南齊 (479 - 502), the upāsaka Liu Qiu 劉虬 (437 - 495)<sup>753</sup> together with ten eminent monks collected the different interpretations of the [former] masters and edited them [collectively] as the *Annotated Lotus Sūtra* 注法華經”<sup>754</sup>. Under the Sui this text was still extant and Zhiyi and Jizang quoted it in their works<sup>755</sup>. Through Jizang’s notes we know that the annotations collected by Liu Qiu belonged to eight masters, among which there were Kumārajīva himself, Sengzhao and Daorong<sup>756</sup>. We know also that this work had a preface, probably written by the editor himself<sup>757</sup>.

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<sup>753</sup> Liu Qiu (whose courtesy name was Lingyu 靈預, or also Deming 德明) was from Nieyang 涅陽 in the Nanyang Prefecture 南陽 and came from a family of cultivated men of letters (both his father and grandfather were famous for their literary talents). Well versed in the Classics and in History, he also had a keen interest in the Buddhist scriptures. During the Taishi 太始 era of the Liu Song 劉宋 (465 - 471) he was employed as Record Keeper 記室 by the King of Jin Liu Xiyou 劉休祐 (445 - 471) but shortly after resigned. At the beginning of the Jianwu 建武 era (494 - 497) he was repeatedly invited to assume official positions and serve in the government but he always refused, preferring instead to lead a secluded life dedicated the study of the Buddhist doctrine. He eventually mastered the Tripitaka and the meditation skills, and constantly fasted and meditated alone. Since he loved the secludedness of the Xisha area 西沙洲 near Jiangling 江陵, he moved there and preached on the scriptures. He composed a *Lotus Sūtra Commentary* which was later lost, quotations from it surviving only in Zhiyi’s *Fahua wenju* 法華經文句 and Jizang’s *Fahua Xuanlun* 法華玄論 and *Fahua yishu* 法華義疏. His only complete surviving writing is a *Preface to the Amitartha-sūtra* 無量義經序 (see T276), which had been translated in 481 by the Indian Dharmagatayaśas 曇摩伽陀耶舍. He passed away at the age of 59, his posthumous name being Elder Wenfan (lit. “Model of Literary Refinement”) 文範先生 (see the *Bibliographical Section of the Southern History* 南史列傳, chapter 40)

<sup>754</sup> 「在齊之時，劉虬居士共十名僧務，摺輿師之異言，撰為《注法華》。」 *Preface to Fahuajing yiji* 法華經義記 by Fayun 法雲 (467 - 529) [T 1715], p. 572, a19-20

<sup>755</sup> After the Sui the text slowly became obsolete and completely disappeared. It is interesting to notice that, as it happened for the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*, the *Annotated Lotus Sūtra* started its “downward trend” when a new kind of exegesis of the text, more creative and less connected to textual explanation, had appeared. This kind of approach is found in the *Guangzhai Lotus Sūtra Commentary* 法華光宅疏 [X638] by Fayun 法雲 (467 - 529), a work composed under the Southern Liang 梁 (502 - 557) which served as a basis for Zhiyi and Jizang’s further exegetical elaboration on the same scripture.

<sup>756</sup> Cf. Jizang’s *Fahua xuanlun* 法華玄論: 「次乎齊代有清信優婆塞劉虬，與十許名僧，依傍安、林、壹、遠、之例，什、肇、融、垣之流，撰錄眾師之長秤，為《注法華》也。」《法華玄論》卷 1 (CBETA, T34, no. 1720, p. 363, c14-17)

<sup>757</sup> In his *Fahua xuanlun* 法華玄論 Jizang relates the essential content of this preface: 「十三劉[虬]集注，[...]其序大意云：“教凝於三一之表，果玄於丈六之外。無名無相者，此經之旨歸。自非道越三空，智通十地者，孰能辨。名於無名盾說於無說者哉。”」《法華玄論》卷 2 (CBETA, T34, no. 1720, p. 381, a3-7)



and that the editorial work probably took place at the Dengjie Monastery 等界寺 of Jingzhou 荊州<sup>758</sup>.

Based on this information we can formulate the hypothesis that the editorial equipe that assembled the *Annotated Lotus Sūtra* was also in charge of the editing of the *Annotated Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. The fact that Jizang mentioned these two texts together (cf. Jizang's quote on page 198) and highlighted their similarities (viz. direct explanation of the text not relying on any analytic parceling) gives a little support to this view.

## Second hypothesis (composition took place under the Southern Liang)

The production of collected annotations particularly flourished during the Southern Liang 南梁 (502 - 557). It was during this era that the earliest preserved example of Buddhist *jijie* 集解 was composed; this is the *Dabo Niepan jing jijie* 大般涅槃經集解 (*Collected Annotations on the Nirvāṇasūtra*) [T1763]<sup>759</sup> edited by Baoliang 寶亮 (444 - 509). This work, which collected annotations by some fifteen commentators, was undertaken in the year 509 at imperial order, and the emperor Wudi 武帝 (464 - 549) in person wrote a preface to it<sup>760</sup>. This is but one example of the editorial enterprises (often very voluminous and demanding in terms of scholarship) the emperor commissioned to the many outstanding monks and laic *literati* he liked to surround himself with; these include the *Zhongjing yao chao* 眾經要抄 (in 88 fascicles) edited by Sengmin 僧旻<sup>761</sup> together with Sengliang 僧亮, Senghuang 僧晃, Liuxie 劉勰 and a whole équipe of thirty other people; the *Yilin* 義林 (in 80 fascicles) edited by Zhizang 智藏 (458 - 522) and other twenty monks of great virtue<sup>762</sup>, Senglang's 僧朗 *Zhu dabo Niepanjing* 注大般涅槃經 (in 72 fascicles), Baochang's 寶唱 (d.u.) *Xu Falun lun* 續法輪論 (more than 70 fascicles), *Jing lu yixiang* 經律異相 (in 50 fascicles) [T2121], *Faji* 法集 (in 140 fascicles), *Fansheng Sengfa* 飯聖僧法 (in 5 fascicles); Sengshao's 僧紹 *Hualin Fodian jingmu* 華林佛殿經目 and the *Zhong jing mulu* 眾經錄目 by the learned upāsaka Li Kuo 李廓.

Considered the great scholarly activity thriving at the Wudi's court many of whom consisted in catalogues and collections of earlier materials, would it be possible that also the Guanzhong commentaries on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* were assembled during the Southern Liang under the patronage of Wudi 武帝?

If we look at the sources indeed we find some evidence supporting this hypothesis. The Japanese monk Chikō 智光 (709 - Hōki era 寶龜 770/781) of the Gangō ji 元興寺 wrote a sub-commentary to Jizang's *Jingming xuanlun* 淨名玄論 [T1780] (the *Jōmyō gen ron ryaku jutsu* 淨名玄論略述); when in the text Jizang mentions the names of the four leading Guanzhong scholar-monks Sengrui, Sengzhao, Daorong and Daosheng, Chikō comments that:

<sup>758</sup> See *Xu gaoseng zhuan* (Fa'an's 法安 Biography): "[...]春秋六十五終於等界寺。寺在私洲 (read with variant 斯州) 之上。西望沙洲 (read with variant 州)。即劉虬注《法華》之地。今經臺餘基尚在 (add variant 焉)。" 《續高僧傳》卷 9 (CBETA, T50, no. 2060, p. 493, c3-19)

<sup>759</sup> In those times the *Nirvāṇasūtra* had become one of the most highly regarded and most studied Buddhist texts, and its main tenets (Buddha nature and Nirvāṇa) dominated the Buddhist philosophical and doctrinal discussions.

<sup>760</sup> 「上 (=梁武帝) [...] 天監八年，初勅亮撰《涅槃義疏》十餘萬言。上為之序曰 [...]」 《高僧傳》卷 8 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 381, c21-23)

<sup>761</sup> Sengmin 僧旻 (467 - 527) of the Zhuangyan Temple 莊嚴寺 was one of the "three great monks of the Liang dynasty" (梁朝三大法師) (the other two being Zhizang 智藏 of the Kaishan Monastery 開善寺 and Fayun 法雲 of the Guangzhai Monastery 光宅寺).

<sup>762</sup> On this work see *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶記 [T2034], p. 100, a14-19 and *Da Tang neidian lu* 大唐內典錄 [T2149], p. 267, b11-16

[...] 雖四師同注維摩，而叡、融不入集解中。但什、肇、生三師各為注釋，不相是非，故梁武帝集三家注，合為一部，傳佈萬代。然叡、融二師略為注釋，而不具論，故不入集解中。 [...] <sup>763</sup>

Even though the “four masters” all composed commentaries on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, [Seng]rui and [Dao]rong’s ones were not included in the collective edition [of those commentaries] (*jijie* 集解). Only the commentaries by Kumārajīva, Sengzhao and Daosheng, given that they did not contradict one another, were collected by Emperor Wu of the [Southern] Liang, combined into one edition and transmitted to [the next] thousand eras. However, since the two masters [Seng]rui and [Dao]rong had only written very brief explanations without discussing in detail [the sūtra text], they were not included in the collection.

We do not know precisely what is the source of Chikō’s statement; however, there are good reasons for taking it into serious regard. Chikō is among the most important figures of Japanese Sanron; a very prolific, authoritative and highly influential commentator of Buddhist scriptures of the mid-Nara period<sup>764</sup>, he is in a direct line of transmission of the “Three Treatises School” (*Sanlun zong* 三論宗) in Japan which can be outlined as follows<sup>765</sup>:

Ekan (Kor. Hyegwan) 慧灌 (7 <sup>th</sup> cent.) →	Fukuryō 福亮 →	Chizō 智藏 →	Chikō 智光 (709 - 770/781)
A native of Koguryō, he traveled to China during the Sui dynasty and studied the <i>Sanlun</i> doctrines under Jizang. In 625 he moved to Japan and resided at the Gangō ji, where he lectured on the <i>Three Treatises</i> . He is considered the actual founder of the Japanese Sanron.	A native of the Wu 吳 region in Southern China, he studied <i>Sanlun</i> under Ekan and was also instructed directly from Jizang. Once in Japan he is known to have preached on the <i>Vimalakīrtinirdeśa</i> .	He was the son Fukuryō fathered when he was still a layman. He is said to have learnt the <i>Sanlun</i> doctrine from Ekan together with his father. Some sources <sup>766</sup> also explicitly state that he traveled back to China at the beginning of the Tang for studying the <i>Sanlun</i> again from its original source; this is why he was later credited with the second transmission of these teachings to Japan. When in Japan, he resided at the Hōryū ji 法隆寺 and propagated the teaching of the void.	Together with Raikō 禮光 and Dōji 道慈 (? - 744) he was a leading disciple of Chizō. While he is not reported to have studied in China, his companion Dōji reached the land of the Tang in 702 and stayed there for 16 years, up to 718 (cf. Bingenheimer 2001, p. 85).

As Bingenheimer has pointed out, it is unlikely that Chikō’s master Chizō went back to China again after he had moved to Japan as a child with his father sometime before 645, and his

<sup>763</sup> *Jōmyō gen ron ryaku jutsu* 淨名玄論略述, in *Nihon dai zōkyō* 日本大藏經 (*Japanese Buddhist Canon*), vol. 25, p. 388

<sup>764</sup> Scholars have identified 14 titles in 50 fascicles as Chikō’s authentic writings. Of this consistent corpus of writings only two works have survived in their complete form, namely the above mentioned sub-commentary and a commentary on the *Heart sūtra* named *Maka hannya haramita shingyō jutsugi* 摩訶波羅蜜多心經述義 (see Abe 2007, p. 186). The latter “by the late Nara Period [...] established itself as a classic, setting the standard for the early Heian Buddhist scholar-priests to exercise their exegesis. It represented the exemplary mode of textual production under a regime whose ruling ideology was dominantly Confucian” (*Ibidem*, p. 179)

<sup>765</sup> This information is found in Kokan Shiren’s 虎關師鍊 (1278 - 1346) *Genkō shakusho* 元亨釋書 (1322) [CBETA, B 173]. See also Yang Zengwen 2008, p. 62

<sup>766</sup> E.g. the monk’s biography in *Honchō kōso den* 本朝高僧傳 (1702)

“second transmission” of the Sanron teachings seems a fabrication of historiography; however, it is probably safe to assume that Hyegwan had met both Fukuryō and his son Chizō at Jizang’s place.<sup>767</sup> There is also a strong regional connection between Fukuryō and Jizang; in fact the former was a native of the Wu region (the area South of the Yangtze river centered around Lake Tai including Jiangsu, Southern Anhui and northern Zhejiang), the area in which the famous Buddhist master was active for most of his life.

Hence Chikō was the repository of a master-disciple transmission of teachings from Jizang himself which dated back just one generation before, and certainly could rely on a vast corpus of first hand materials from China and well documented information passed down by his teacher. Indeed, the fact that he could rely on a vast amount of Chinese texts is confirmed by the fact that in his commentary Chikō quotes a wide array of Buddhist and non-Buddhist sources, to the point that his work - as Kawano well explains<sup>768</sup> - provides some important clues about which Chinese texts circulated in the Japanese temples during the Nara period and how they were used by the Japanese monks.

Given the above historical context, it is likely that the information provided by Chikō on the editing of the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* came from an authoritative source, maybe from Jizang himself. It is noteworthy that Chikō refers to the *Collective Vimalakīrti* by the term “jijie” 集解, as Jizang himself did in his *Fahua yishu* 法華義疏 [T1721] (p. 452, b16-23).

Hanazuka has substantiated the hypothesis that the *Collective Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* was first assembled by Wudi 武帝 with the following further arguments<sup>769</sup>:

1. The term *jijie* “collected explanations” used by Chikō is also found in the title of the *Daban niepan jing jijie* 大般涅槃經集解, the major work composed under the Southern Liang by Baoliang 寶亮 at the order of the Emperor Wudi. There is a strong connection between the two texts for what regards their editing and outlook.
2. Even though during the Southern Liang the doctrinal interests of the scholar-monks had turned to the *Nirvāṇasūtra* and other tathāgatagarbha scriptures, Wudi still highly valued the study of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts and in his *Preface to a Commentary on the Larger Prajñāpāramitā* 注解大品序 (preserved in *Chu sanzang jiji* [T2145], vol. 8, p. 53, b28-p. 54, c11)) speaks in favor of an integration of the *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Nirvāṇasūtra* without privileging one scripture over the other; in the same text he also shows a great respect for the ancient Guanzhong exegesis.<sup>770</sup>
3. Wudi had studied the *Nirvāṇa* texts widely circulating in the South, but had also apprehended the doctrines of the Northern Buddhism from the Korean monk Sūngnang 僧朗 (fl. 476 - 512), a disciple of Fadu 法度 (437 - 500), who triggered the revival of the Northern Mādhyamika in the South<sup>771</sup>. For these reason the emperor would have been in the position of operating a synthesis between the two.
4. Being the emperor, not a Buddhist monk, Wudi was not involved in any sectarian competition between different Buddhist schools, hence he did not privileged any of them, and for this reason in editing the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* he did not show a preference for Daosheng (who must have enjoyed a much greater fame in the South than Kumārajīva and Sengzhao) and was unbiased in assembling the three commentaries.

<sup>767</sup> Cf. Bingenheimer 2001, p. 56 and 81 - 82

<sup>768</sup> Cf. Kawano Kimiko 2012

<sup>769</sup> Hanazuka Hisayoshi 1982, pp. 208 - 209

<sup>770</sup> Cf. the following passage 「釋論以注經本。略其多解，取其要釋。此外或捃關河舊義，或依先達故語。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 54, b14-15)

<sup>771</sup> For an analysis of the biography and thought of Sūngnang see Plassen 2005. According to Plassen, the monk had headed south crossing the Yangtze River around 476.

We might add to these arguments some other elements worth considering. As Tang Yongtong pointed out, Wudi was not only a devout Buddhist practitioner but also a refined man of letters who influenced the scholarship of his age. Besides promoting the search and collection of Buddhist texts, their revision and correction, he particularly valued the exegetical practice<sup>772</sup>.

Indeed, Wudi set high standards for the composition and editing of the various works he commissioned (which were usually carried on by a large team of monks guided by a sort of “editor in chief”), and he examined them personally; we know for example that when presented with the *Hualin Fodian jingmu* 華林佛殿經目 he had commissioned to Sengshao, he was not satisfied with it and order Baochang to re-edit the text<sup>773</sup>.

As to the emperor’s personal involvement in the scholarly work and to the importance assigned to exegesis, the *Commentary on the Larger Prajñāpāramitā* in 50 fascicles (a work that is attributed to him<sup>774</sup>) constitutes perhaps the best example. In his preface to the now lost text, Wudi relates that:

「朕以聽覽餘日集名僧二十人。與天保寺法寵等。詳其去取。雲 (read with variant 靈) 根寺慧令等兼以筆功」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 54, b12-13)

During the days in which I was not occupied with managing the state affairs, I [, the emperor,] gathered twenty renowned monks; together with Falong of the Tianbao Monastery and others, I carefully examined [the materials that] had to be discarded and those which had to be employed; Huiling of the Linggen Monastery and others were in charge of the writing.

In the same preface Wudi clarifies that the editors “used the *Da zhidu lun* for annotating the text, omitting the explanations that were excessively lengthy and picking out the essential ones. In addition, [they] selected [materials from] the old Guanhe (viz. Guanzhong) exegesis or relied upon the old sayings of the former sages”<sup>775</sup>. This shows a great familiarity with the composition of exegetical works based on the collection and re-elaboration of ancient materials<sup>776</sup>; it also denotes a high regard for the old Guanzhong exegesis which is chosen as one of the sources for the exegesis.

Considering the historical data provided above, the hypothesis that the earliest version of the collected annotations on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* by the Guanzhong exegetes was produced under the Southern Liang, possibly by emperor Wu himself, is to be considered a realistic one. It cannot yet be established as a fact due to the lack of direct witnesses or side evidence corroborating Chikō’s statement, but it might be confirmed in the future due to the discovery of new documentary evidence.

<sup>772</sup> Cf. Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 360

<sup>773</sup> Cf. 「十四年。勅安樂寺僧紹撰《華林佛殿經目》。雖復勒成，未快帝旨。又勅唱重撰。乃因紹前錄。注述合離甚有科據。一帙四卷。雅快時望。」《續高僧傳》卷 1 (CBETA, T50, no. 2060, p. 426, c21-24)

<sup>774</sup> Cf. 「帝又注大品經五十卷」《續高僧傳》卷 1 (CBETA, T50, no. 2060, p. 426, c27)

<sup>775</sup> 「採《釋論》以注經本；略其多解，取其要釋。此外或捃關河舊義。或依先達故語。」《出三藏記集》卷 8 (CBETA, T55, no. 2145, p. 54, b13-15)

<sup>776</sup> On this regard see also the following passage from the preface to *Jing lü yixiang* 經律異相: “The emperor is one with the [perfect,] universal awakening, and matches the all-pervading intelligence. He greatly spreads the teaching of the sūtras and benefits both monks and laymen. He possesses an extensive knowledge of the ancient learning and broadly collects the lost scriptures. Hence lost gāthās and dispersed chapters often were found again. [The works] we have obtained [while composing this text] are many. 「皇帝同契等覺，比德遍知。大弘經教，並利法俗。廣延博古，旁採遺文。於是散偈、流章，往往而 (read with variant 復) 出。今之所獲，蓋亦多矣。」《經律異相》卷 1 (CBETA, T53, no. 2121, p. 1, a12-14)

## 6. The *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* in the ancient catalogues and its two different editions (the 8 fascicles one and the 10 fascicles one)

Since the Tang we find the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* registered in various catalogues; from these sources we know that in those times the text circulated in two different versions, one in 8 fascicles and the other in 10.

Here I will first provide an overview of the catalogue entries and then discuss the differences between the two editions.

Jōgyō 常曉 records in his catalogue (839) a work titled *Jingming Guanzhong shu* 淨名關中疏 in 10 fascicles adding the annotation: “if one compares it with Daoye’s *Commentary* he can know about the similarities and differences [between the two texts]. This commentary erases [parts of Daoye’s work] and supplements others”<sup>777</sup>; it probably indicated the *Collected Guanzhong Commentary* in 10 fascicles. If it were so, this would be the earliest catalogue entry of the scripture. The Korean monk Ŭich’ōn 義天 (1055 - 1101), in China from May 27, 1085 to August 2, 1086, registered the commentary in his *Sinp’yōn chejong kyojang ch’ongnok* 新編諸宗教藏總錄 (1090): under the entry *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* 維摩經 he records a commentary (zhu 注) in 10 fascicles by Kumārajīva, Sengzhao and Daosheng. Eichō 永超’s *Tōiki dentō mokuroku* (1094) also records a *Weimojie jing zhu* 維摩詰經註 in 8 fascicles and adds in a note the alternative title of *Jingming jijie* 淨名集解<sup>778</sup>. The *Yiwen zhi* 藝文誌 section of the *Song History* 宋史 (completed in 1345) records a *Weimo jing* 維摩經 in ten fascicles “translated by Sengzhao” (*Sengzhao yi* 僧肇譯)<sup>779</sup>.

Another important witness of the collective commentary is Chao Gongwu 晁公武’s (1105 - 1180) *Junzhai dushu zhi* 郡齋讀書誌 (“*Record of reading books at the Commandery Study*”)<sup>780</sup>. This private library catalogue compiled in 1151 records the collective commentary under the title of *Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經 and provides some essential information about the text; here Chao says that the commentary collects the annotations on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* by Kumārajīva, Sengzhao, Daosheng and Daorong which have been rearranged into a single work counting 10 fascicles; moreover he adds: “I have obtained [this text] from Dong Taixu’s 董太虛 house. This is the Xiangyang edition”<sup>781</sup>.

<sup>777</sup> 「[淨名]經關中疏 十卷 (與道液疏同異可詳, 刪補註解)」《東域傳燈目錄》卷 1 (CBETA, T55, no. 2183, p. 1151, c11-12)

<sup>778</sup> It is important to point out that, besides the 10 fascicles version of the *Collective Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*, the same catalogue records also the three independent commentaries by Kumārajīva (in 3 fascicles), Sengzhao (in 5 fascicles) and Daosheng (in 3 fascicles). This accounts for the long survival of these works that did not suddenly disappear upon the publication of the collective commentary.

<sup>779</sup> The character *yi* 譯 (“to translate”) is often found as a mistaken writing for *shi* 釋 (“to explain”).

<sup>780</sup> This is the first extant Chinese private library catalogue. “[It] contains annotations on 1,468 books, many of which were bought by the author when a magistrate at Rongzhou 榮州 in Sichuan (hence the title of the catalogue)” (Wilkinson 2000, p. 265 - 266). Chao says in his preface that part of the books in his library came from his ancestors, while another consistent part (fifty cases) was inherited from Jing Du 井度 (aka *The gentleman from Nanyang* 南陽公) (Southern Song), an important book collector and printer he befriended while holding an official position in Sichuan (on Jing Du see also Li Yu’an 1989, pp. 86 - 87).

<sup>781</sup> “予得之董太虛家, 蓋襄陽木本也”. In the *Yuanwei* edition 宛委本 of Chao’s catalogue and in Ma Duanlin’s 馬端臨 (1254—1323) *Wenxian tongkao* 文獻通考 the character 木 is absent, this is why I have emended it from my translation. This script could also be read as “This is a woodblock [print] from Xiangyang”, but the term *muben* 木本 is not used anywhere else in the catalogue, where for “woodblock print” we generally find *keban* 刻板.

Somewhere else in Chao’s catalogue mention is made to a man from Xiangyang 襄陽 having Dong 董 as surname; however, due to the corruption of the text, it is impossible to read his name and courtesy name (《藏寂軒》文稿, 右皇朝董□字□□, 襄陽人 – Fascicle 19, *Bieji lei xia* 集類下, Chao Gongwu 1990, p. 1048).

To this another brief annotation is added mentioning a certain “Li Fan 李繁 who lived under the Tang”<sup>782</sup>, proving that such men was well acquainted with this work.

Li Fan was the son of Li Bi 李泌 (722 - 789) from Jingzhao 京兆 (i.e. Chang’an), a Tang scholar and statesman<sup>783</sup> who had inherited from his father Li Chengxiu 李承休 (d.u.) an imposing private library<sup>784</sup>, which he enlarged and further organized. After Li Bi had passed away, the library was inherited by Li Fan who moved it to Suizhou 隨州 (Hubei Province) where he had resettled for covering the position of Regional Inspector (*cishi* 刺史).

Li Fan was a man of vast erudition and was very familiar with the Buddhist doctrines and with the meditation practices. Once - probably in 823 - the famous prose writer Han Yu 韓愈 (768 - 824), with whom he was well acquainted, sent a message in verses to the Buddhist monk Zhu Gejue 諸葛覺 (religious name Danran 澹然) suggesting him to seek refuge in Suizhou, where he could improve his literary education profiting from Li Fan’s library and its owner’s erudition. The first lines of the poem read as follows:

The family of the Marquis of Ye 郾 (i.e. Li Bi) owns so many books.  
Stored on the shelves are thirty thousand scrolls.  
From each of them hangs an [ivory] label<sup>785</sup>,  
[they look] as new as if no hand ever touched them.  
[Li Fan] has a talent for memorizing and reading:  
once he has cast a glance [to a text] he does not need to read it again.  
Extraordinary! The writings of all sages  
end up stored in piles in his belly. [...] <sup>786</sup>

<sup>782</sup> “Li Fan, who lived under the Tang, said that the attribution [of this collection to Sengzhao (?)] has been made by later *literati*” 唐李繁頗言此注後人依託者 (Chao Gongwu 1990, pp. 775 - 776)

<sup>783</sup> Li Bi covered high positions in the administration and was famous for his vast erudition; his fondness for books gained him the surname of “city of books” (*shucheng* 書城). He was particularly well versed in such texts as the *Yijing* and the *Laozi*, and amused himself with the legends of the Taoist immortals, a passion which caused him the despise of the more “orthodoxly” Confucian literati of his times. The Buddhist sources describe his encounter with the excentric monk Mingzan 明瓚 of the Nanyue Monastery 南嶽寺 (Li Bi had lived in seclusion for some time in the area of Mount Heng 衡山 (Hunan Province) during the Qianyuan period 乾元 (758 - 760) (see for example *Song gaoseng zhuan* [T2061], p. 834, a17-27).

<sup>784</sup> Relying on the now lost *Biography of the Marquis of Ye* 郾侯家傳, the Song scholar Wang Yinglin 王應麟 (1223 - 1296) relates that “Li Bi’s father Li Chengxiu had collected [books in the number of] twenty thousand scrolls. He had admonished his sons and grandchildren not to take [the books] outside; if anyone wanted to read them [he could do that in the library] and was served food in a separate building [of the house]” 李泌父承休, 聚書二萬餘卷。誠子孫不許出門, 有求讀者, 別院供饌 (Wang Yinglin, *Kunxue jiwen* 困學紀聞, *Kao shi* 考史, vol. 14). As Wilkinson pointed out “private libraries had been in existence [in China] since at least the Han, if not before, but only the very rich could afford them because of the rarity and high price of the books. There were 20 or 30 book collectors in the Tang, but private collections became more common only during the Song” (Wilkinson 2000, p. 265)

<sup>785</sup> The Ming scholar Peng Dayi 彭大翼 (1552 - 1643) wrote that “[...] the Marquis of Ye built up a library in which he collected more than thirty thousand scrolls. He marked the *Classics* with a red ivory label, the *Histories* with a green one, the *Philosophical Works* with a blue one, and the *Collectanea* with a white one” 唐李郾侯起書樓, 積書三萬餘卷, 經用紅牙簽, 史用綠牙簽, 子用青牙簽, 集用白牙簽 (*Shan tang sikao* 山堂肆考, quoted in Chen Dedi, p.141).

Li Bi also stamped each book with a seal created *ad hoc* which read “Seal of the library of the Marquis of Ye” 郾侯圖書刻章 (the seal is preserved in *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 by Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (815 - 907), see Zhang Yanyuan 1964, p. 55)

<sup>786</sup> 郾侯家多書, 插架三萬軸。一一懸牙簽, 新若手未觸。為人強記覽, 過眼不再讀。偉哉群聖文, 磊落載其腹 [...] (*Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (1705), vol. 342, n. 23 (Original title: “Addressed to Zhu Gejue, [suggesting him] to go to Suizhou for studying on [Li Fan’s] books (at that time Li Fan was the Regional Inspector of Suizhou; [he was the son of] the Grand Councilor [Li] Bi)” 送諸葛覺往隨州讀書 (李繁時為隨州刺史, 宰相泌之子也))



Some other elements in Li Fan's biography attest his familiarity with Buddhism. As reported in his biography in *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, in the year 826 on the day of emperor Jingzong's 敬宗 birthday Li Fan was summoned to the Linde Hall 麟德殿 (also known as *San dian* 三殿) at the Daming Palace 大明宮<sup>787</sup> along with Ding Gongzhuo 丁公著 (762 - 826) and Lu Geng 陸瓦 (764 - 834) in order to debate with "the adepts of the Buddhist Path" (*Futu dao shi* 浮圖道士). Moreover, Chao Gongwu relates that Li Fan had studied under the Jiangxi meditation master Daoyi 道一 (aka Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一, 709 - 788) and that when he was in prison aware of his forthcoming death<sup>788</sup> he had composed 16 works in which he explained the principles of meditation, "believing that [one] should face life and death without fear"; among these compositions was the *Xuansheng qulu* 玄聖蘊廬 in 2 fascicles.<sup>789</sup>

After Li Fan's death part of the family library was acquired by the Tang poet Zhu Qingyu 朱慶餘 (d.u.) and part of it went dispersed<sup>790</sup>. It could well be that the copy of *Zhu Weimojie jing* in 10 fascicles collected and catalogued under the Southern Song by Chao Gongwu had formerly belonged to Li Fan's library. This would explain the note by Li Fan mentioned in the catalogue, which is likely to have been an annotation written on the manuscript itself.

A fact worth considering is that Li Bi resided in Chang'an. Even though he went through ups and downs at the Tang court and for some periods of time he chose for his own safety to live in seclusion in faraway places, he was particularly valued by emperor Suzong 肅宗 (711 - 762) who found in him a trusted advisor, to the point that "his power was greater than that of a Grand Councilor"<sup>791</sup>; given that Suzong's reign goes from 756 to 762, we can infer that at least during those years Li Bi was surely in Chang'an. At that same time Daoye was also in full activity at the capital city, busy with his lectures and translation work both at the Zisheng Temple and the Ximing Temple; in 760 he had composed his *Guanzhong shu* and probably in his spare time he was already revising it for the final edition of 765.

Even though the mystery remains about the identity of the editor(s) of the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* in 10 fascicles, about the exact date and circumstances in which it was produced and about its appearance in Li Fan's library, it is likely that its origins are closely related to the undertakings of a group of monks involved in the translation and preaching activities who had one of their headquarters in the Zisheng Monastery in the Tang capital, a city that constituted the backdrop of most of the vicissitudes regarding our text. Be as it may, leaving all speculations aside, for the time being this is how far we can get in tracing the origins of the 10 fascicles edition of the commentary.

A crucial question we need to answer at this point is the one regarding the differences between the 8 fascicles version and the 10 fascicles one and the relation between the two.

An incomplete 8 fascicles version titled *Weimojing jijie* 維摩經集解 and dating back to the Heian Period 平安時代 (794 - 1185) was preserved in the Tōnomine 多武峯 Tanzan Shrine 談

<sup>787</sup> The term "Daming Palace" 大明宮 actually indicates the imperial palace complex of Tang Dynasty located in Chang'an. It was the main political center and served also as residence of the Tang emperors.

<sup>788</sup> Accused (probably unjustly) to have ordered the killing of innocent people, Li Fan was ordered by the emperor to commit suicide (*cisi* 賜死), something which happened in 829 in Chang'an. Cf. *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, vol. 17 (文宗上): "十一月丁丑朔。庚辰，太子太傅鄭綱卒。丙戌，敕前亳州刺史李繁於京兆府賜死"。

<sup>789</sup> This information is related in the description of *Xuansheng qulu* 玄聖蘊廬, a work which is registered in the section "Buddhist works" (Shi shu 釋書) of Chao Gongwu's catalogue (see Chao Gongwu 1990, p. 794). A few fragments of this text are found in *Fazang suijin lu* 法藏碎金錄 [B 153] by Chao Jiong 晁迥 (951 - 1034).

<sup>790</sup> On the vicissitudes of Li Bi's library see Li Yu'an 1989, p. 42 and Chen Dedi 2011, pp. 140 - 141 and pp. 174 - 175

<sup>791</sup> "權逾宰相" (cf. Li Bi's biography in *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書)

山神社 (Nara Prefecture, Japan) and is one of the two editions<sup>792</sup> used for proofreading (*canjiao ben* 參校本) the text chosen as “basic version” (*di ben* 底本) of the commentary<sup>793</sup> which was eventually included in Taishō Tripiṭaka as T1775. This has made it possible to make a comparative analysis of the two versions and find out the differences between them. Let me briefly point them out relying on the outline provided by Wang Jianjun<sup>794</sup>:

1. In comparison to the 10 fascicles edition, in the 8 fascicles one Kumārajīva is styled Luoshi 羅什 instead of Shi 什, and we find Shi Sengzhao 釋僧肇 instead of Zhao 肇, Zhu Daosheng 竺道生 instead of Sheng 生, Shi Daorong 釋道融 instead of Daorong 道融. Moreover, the title of each chapter is preceded by the word *jijie* 集解 (“collected explanation”).
2. Compared to the 10 fascicles editions, in the 8 fascicles one many compound words are written in a reversed order, e.g. 手中有寶 is written 有寶手中, 崖岸 is written 岸崖 etc. This phenomenon is seen also in the independent commentary by Sengzhao and some instances are found in Daoye’s *Jingming jijie Guanzhong shu*. This shows a close relation between these three texts which share a preference for more literary expressions which evolve towards a more colloquial language in the more recent versions in 10 fascicles.
3. In the 8 fascicles version, even when Kumārajīva’s and Sengzhao’s comments are almost identical, both are written down in their entirety, whereas in the 10 fascicles versions we find in some cases (as we have seen before) the insertions “[Sengzhao’s] explanation is the same as the above one” (*shi tongshang ye* 釋同上也), or “[Seng]zhao’s annotation is the same as the above one” (*Zhao zhu tongshang* 肇注同上), or also “[Seng]zhao’s annotation is the same” (*Zhao zhu tong* 肇注同).
4. In the 8 fascicles version we find in the text the expression *huben* 胡本 (“foreign version”), while the 10 fascicles version has instead *fanben* 梵本 (“Sanskrit version”).
5. The 10 fascicles versions include insertions of some passages which are absent from the 8 fascicle one. The most evident case is the insertion of the long passage from the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* into Sengzhao’s comment, but other examples could also be made<sup>795</sup>.
6. Differences are found in the 8 and 10 fascicles versions in the division of fascicles. Moreover, the former is an incomplete version from which the chapters 8 (*Fodao pin* 佛道品) and 9 (*Rubuer famen* 入不二法門) are missing.

As to the relation between these two versions, Wang Jianjun (pp. 13 - 14) has come to the following conclusions (which on the whole had been formerly expressed by Usuda<sup>796</sup>): the 8 fascicles version is considerably older than the 10 fascicles one (this clearly emerges from the linguistic analysis); there is a continuity between the two editions, and the latter seems to be the result of a process of refining and polishing of the former; the compilation of the 8 fascicle version represents a key intermediate passage in the evolution from the independent commentaries to the version in 10 fascicles that has been transmitted to us; as it appears from the sources, the 8 fascicles version had a limited circulation in China, probably because it was soon replaced by the the 10 fascicles one, which evidently was considered more accurate and readable;

<sup>792</sup> The second one is a version in 10 fascicles dating to the 3rd year of the Jōkyō Period 貞享 (1684 - 1688), i.e. 1686 and preserved in print edition at the Ōtani University 大谷大學 in Kyōto.

<sup>793</sup> This is a version in 10 fascicles dating to the 18<sup>th</sup> year of the Kan’ei Period 寬永 (1624 - 1644), i.e. 1641, and preserved in print edition at the Religion University 宗教大學. 【原】寬永十八年刊宗教大學藏本

<sup>794</sup> Cf. Wang Jianjun 2011, pp. 12 - 14

<sup>795</sup> E.g. the passages 「是以大聖為心病之醫王。觸事皆是法之良藥。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9 〈菩薩行品 11〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 404, c19-20) and 「故言不在不離也。」《注維摩詰經》卷 9 〈見阿闍佛品 12〉 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 411, b11) are absent from the 8 fascicles version.

<sup>796</sup> See Usuda Junzō 1977. Cf. also Shi Guopu 1998, pp. 54 - 55

the rearrangement of the 8 fascicles version into the 10 fascicles one was influenced by the appearance of Daoye's *Jingming Guanzhong shu*.

On this last point the Japanese scholar Hanazuka goes even further, and makes the hypothesis that the editor the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* in 10 fascicles was actually Daoye in person. This assumption is based on the following three observations: first, among the *Guanzhong* exegetical materials Daoye particularly valued Sengzhao's explanations, to the point that in his *Guanzhong shu* he reproduced in its entirety Sengzhao's preface immediately after his own introduction. This outlook was "inherited" by the 10 fascicles version of the commentary which opens with Sengzhao's introduction (such introduction is instead not included in the 8 fascicles version); second, the structure of Daoye's *Guanzhong shu* (i.e. the assembly of annotations by different commentators, having Sengzhao's one as main reference) is very similar to that of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* in 10 fascicles; third, in his times Daoye was an authoritative researcher of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and his exegetical works enjoyed great popularity and diffusion (this is proved - as it has been said above - by the large quantity of manuscripts reproducing Daoye's works which have been found in Dunhuang), and this might well have been the reason why also the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* encountered great appreciation and diffusion<sup>797</sup>.

On the basis of the available evidence, Hanazuka's supposition cannot be confirmed or falsified; for the time being, it can be taken as a stimulating working hypothesis. Neither is it possible to solve the mystery regarding the origin of the 8 fascicles version: is this the same text produced under the Southern Dynasties (probably - as we have seen - during the Southern Liang) and then consulted under the Sui by Zhiyi and Jizang? All that we can say on this matter is that some features of the version of the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* quoted by Jizang in his *Weimo yishu* 維摩經義疏 [T1781] (a work composed at the Hongfa Monastery 弘法寺 of Chang'an) match with those of the 8 fascicles version; viz. instead of 肇曰 we often find 僧肇 / 釋僧肇云, instead of 什曰 we mostly find 羅什云, instead of 生曰 we find 道生云. Moreover, in the passages quoted by Jizang we always find *huben* 胡本 instead of *fanben* 梵本<sup>798</sup>.

## 7. The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* in 10 fascicles under the Northern Song (960-1127)

Some internal evidence enables us to reconstruct some of the vicissitudes the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* in 10 fascicles went through during the Northern Song.

In the transmitted canonic version of the text we find an afterword (*houxu* 後序) which originally accompanied a stone-carved version of the whole scripture commissioned by the eminent Northern Song mandarin Zhang Qixian 張齊賢 (942 - 1014) as an offer to the Buddha "for the grace received". This interesting document, in which the scholar-official explains the reasons of his pious offering, reads as follows:

「壬午歲冬首，余自右補闕、直史館、江南轉運使詔還。聚族乘舟，順流而下。時十月九日，泊于湖口之側。將夕，有一人年可五十許，衣服、狀貌類于漁者。拜于岸次。自陳：「累世水居（南中有居牌筏舟船之上，號名「水居」）預知風水」。袖中出《水行圖子》，以獻且言：「十四日當有大風事」。備錄異記。又數日晝夢一人，衣皂衣，水中出其半身。自稱「江饒」，要《維摩經》十卷。覺而異之。」

<sup>797</sup> Cf. Hanazuka Hisayoshi 1982, pp. 206 - 207

<sup>798</sup> See for example: 「羅什」曰：胡本云：“如斷泥”。今言如陶家輪。明就中央斷取。如陶家輪。」《維摩經義疏》卷6〈見阿閼佛品12〉(CBETA, T38, no. 1781, p. 988, b3-5)

十四日果於荻港之上遇大風暴。起船將覆，沒者數四，僅而獲全。即先言風水之日，夢中稱曰江饒。舉家脫魚腹之葬，不亦幸乎？屈于京師，遍令求訪《維摩經》十卷者，咸曰：“無之”。不數月，余於所親處覩一經函。發而視之，即《維摩經》一部十卷。懿夫，金文玉偈之殊勝，海藏龍宮之守護，功德之力，其昭昭乎！其昭昭乎！愚冥之徒不能起信，深可悲矣！因擇工人，俾之彫刻。志願散施，貴廣傳布，用標靈異。直紀歲時：聖宋淳化四年八月十五日 道德里序《注維摩詰經》卷 10 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 419, c14-p. 420, a3)

In the year 982 at the beginning of winter I was ordered to go back [to the capital Bianjing 汴京 (the present-day Kaifeng 開封, Henan Province)] from my position of Rectifier of Omissions of the Right, Auxiliary in the Historiography Office and Jiangnan Transport Commissioner. [Hence] I took a boat with all my family and went down the river. It was October 28 when we moored at the side of Hukou. As the night was falling, a man approximately on his fifties with fisherman-like dress and appearance greeted us from the river bank. He said: “For generations [my kin] has been living by the river (*shuiju* 水居) ([original annotation:] in the South there are people living on boat houses, they are called *shuiju*) and I am able to foreknow [the changes of] wind and water”; he took out from his sleeve a *Navigation Chart* and offered it [to me] while saying: “On the 14<sup>th</sup> day of this month (i.e. November 2) there will be a storm”. I made a detailed record in order to remember that unusual event. Moreover, for several nights I dreamed a man dressed in a black robe who emerged from the water with half of his body. He referred to himself as *Jiangrao* (lit. “Mercy of the river”) and wanted [to obtain] the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* [Commentary] in 10 fascicles. I woke up finding [the dream] extraordinary.

Indeed, on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month over Digang we run into a storm which lifted the boat [to the point that] it was about to capsize. Four people drowned but we luckily survived.

[It was at that point that I understood the reason why the fisherman] had previously mentioned the date in which there would be a change of wind and water, and the man of the dream had called himself “Mercy of the River”! Wasn’t it fortunate that the whole family avoided ending up eaten by fish?

Having reached the capital city I asked many people to seek [for me] the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* [Commentary] in 10 fascicles, but [those who were asked about it] all said they did not have it. Only a few months later, at a friend’s house I saw a sūtra-case”; [I opened it,] I took out [the scripture] and looked: it was the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* [Commentary] in 10 fascicles. What an amazing [discovery]!

How shiny are the sublimity of the golden words and jade verses [of the sūtras], the protection of the treasury [of all sūtras] at the bottom of the sea in the Nāga Palace, and the power of meritorious virtues! How shiny they are! And how pitiful are the ignorant, incapable [as they are] of awakening to the faith [in the Buddha]! It is for this reason that I chose an artisan and made him carve [this scripture] on stone.

It is my wish to do it as an offering and I want [the text] to widely circulate, and the miraculous event [that happened to me] be known through it. Below is the time [when this was carved]:

15<sup>th</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> month, 4<sup>th</sup> year of the Chunhua Era of the Holy Song [Dynasty] (i.e. September 3, 993). Afterword [carved] at the *Daode* District.

The details here related about the mandarin Zhang Qixian find a correspondence in his biography in the *Song History*<sup>799</sup>: he indeed occupied those positions in the imperial bureaucracy and in 982 made his way from the south back to the capital Kaifeng. In the official biography - as we might expect - no mention is made about his adventurous trip on the river and the various omens he was presented with, nor do we find elements portraying him as a devout Buddhist.

The specific reference to the 10 fascicles version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Commentary is indeed curious. Moreover, the fact that Zhang Qixian spent quite a lot of time searching for the commentary in question and eventually managed to have it carved only eleven years after the

<sup>799</sup> See Zhang Qixian’s biography in *Song History* 宋史 (vol. 265, *Biographies* 列傳, n. 24)

miraculous event seems to point out that the text was not easily available in Kaifeng in those years. Maybe, as it had been wished by the *literatus*, the stone carving of the scripture indeed promoted its preservation and fostered its diffusion.

In the Taishō version of the *Commentary* the afterword by Zhang Qixian is followed by a “colophon” (*tiji* 題記) from which we learn that:

1. The text was “collated again (*chong kan* 重勘) by the śramaṇa Shouxian 守賢 who lectured on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* at the Wansui Western Institute on the Left Street at the Eastern Capital 東京 (i.e. Bianjing 汴京, the nowadays Kaifeng 開封)”<sup>800</sup>
2. After collation, the text was “written down” (*shu* 書) by Zhang Zhiyong 張致用 (Case Reviewer 大理評事 and Assistant Minister at the Court of Judicial Review 大理寺丞), Zhang Yonghe 張用和 (Academician Awaiting Orders 翰林待詔 and Attendant at the Imperial Academy of Calligraphy 御書院祇候) and Zhao Anren 趙安仁 (Assistant of the Editorial Director at the Palace Library 守祕書省著作佐郎 and Auxiliary in the Academy of Scholarly Worthies 直集賢院)<sup>801</sup>
3. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the Huangyou Era 皇祐 (1051) the text was “revised again” (*chong jiao* 重較) by Xia Song 夏竦 (whose name is erroneously written in the document as Xia La 夏辣)<sup>802</sup>, an illustrious scholar-official who covered various prestigious posts in the local and central administration of the state becoming Commissioner at the Bureau of Military Affairs (the paramount central government agency in control of the state’s military forces) 樞密使 and Grand Councilor 宰相. Due to his literary skills he also took part in many scholarly activities, for example he served at the Academy of the Scholarly Worthies 集賢院, worked as Compiler of the Official Histories 國史編修官 and as Teacher at the School for the Heir Apparent 教學資善堂 where all the sons of the reigning emperor were educated. He was Hanlin Academician 翰林學士 and Scholar of the Dragon Diagram Hall 龍圖閣學士<sup>803</sup>.

As we can notice, exception made for the monk Shouxian 守賢, the other people mentioned above are government officials in service at the top level academies and central agencies of the state. Why do we find these literati involved in the transcription and revision of Buddhist texts?

If we inquire into the official religious policy carried out under the early Northern Song period, we find that in order to revive the activity of translation of the Buddhist scriptures, in the year 980 Emperor Taizu 太祖 (r. 960 - 976) had ordered the Imperial Commissioner Zheng Shoujun 鄭守均 to establish in the western section of the Taipingxingguo Monastery 太平興國寺 in Kaifeng the “Institute for the Translation of the Sūtras” (*Yi jing yuan* 譯經院). As Tansen explains in his study on this topic:

<sup>800</sup> 「東京左街萬歲西院講維摩經沙門守賢重勘」《注維摩詰經》卷 10 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 420, a5)

<sup>801</sup> Cf. 「宣德郎守大理評事權大理寺丞公事張致用翰林待詔承奉郎守少府監丞御書院祇候賜緋魚袋張用和承奉郎守祕書省著作佐郎直集賢院武騎尉賜緋魚袋趙安仁等書」《注維摩詰經》卷 10 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 420, a5-9)

<sup>802</sup> Cf. 「皇祐三年月日推誠保順同德崇仁守正翊戴功臣武寧軍節度徐州管內觀察處置等使開府儀同三司檢校太師兼侍中行徐州大都督府長史判河陽軍州事。兼管內河堤勸農使馬步軍都部署提舉鄭滑等州巡檢兵甲公事上柱國鄭國公食邑一萬三千七百食實封肆玖佰戶夏竦重較。」《注維摩詰經》卷 10 (CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 420, a10-15)

<sup>803</sup> On Xia Song 夏竦 see his biography in *Song History* 宋史 (vol. 283, *Biographies* 列傳, n. 42) and the *Funerary Stele of Xia Song aka Mr. Wenzhuang* 夏文莊公竦神道碑銘 by Wang Gui 王珪 (preserved in *Huayang ji* 華陽集, vol 47). A useful chronology of Xia Song’s life is provided in Sun Gang 2014.

The Institute with three halls - a translation hall (*yijing tang* 譯經堂) in the center, a hall for the stylists (*runwen tang* 潤文堂) in the east, and a hall for the philological assistants (*zheng yi tang* 正義堂) in the west - was completed in the sixth lunar month of 982.<sup>804</sup>

The main translators - who were ordered to take residence in the Institute - were the three leading Indian monks then present in China, viz. the Kaśmīri Tianxizai 天息災 (Devaśāntika?, d. 1000) and Fahu 法護 (Dharmarakṣa, 963 - 1058) who had reached Kaifeng together in 980, plus Shihu 施護 (Dānapāla, fl. 970s) from the state of Uḍḍiyāna in North-east India who arrived at the Northern Song capital in 1004<sup>805</sup>. They were assisted by a number of Chinese monks (among whom the most prominent is no doubt Weijing 惟淨, 973 - 1051)<sup>806</sup> and government officials. The latter were accomplished men of letters who shared an interest for Buddhist texts and doctrines; they were appointed “Officials of Translation and Stylistic Embellishment” (*yiwen runwen guan* 譯文潤文官) and usually served at the Institute as “Stylists” (*runwen* 潤文)<sup>807</sup> and compilers of catalogues registering by year the translations completed<sup>808</sup>.

If we examine the names of the *literati* who covered this post along the years<sup>809</sup> we find that the above mentioned Zhao Anren 趙安仁 (957 - 1018) and Xia Song 夏竦 (985 - 1051) figure prominently among them. The former worked at the Institute as Stylist for a very long period of time (from 1006 to 1017) during which, together with Yang Yi 楊億 (974 - 1020), also compiled the *Record of the Dharma Treasures [Compiled during the] Dazhongxiangfu [Era]*

<sup>804</sup> Tansen 2002, pp. 34 - 35; cf. *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀「時上盛意翻譯。乃詔中使鄭守均。於太平興國寺西建譯經院。為三堂。中為譯經。東序為潤文。西序為證義」《佛祖統紀》卷 43 (CBETA, T49, no. 2035, p. 398, a6-9)

<sup>805</sup> Other foreign monks who worked at the Institute are Fatian 法天 (Dharmadeva, ? - 1001) from Middle India who, before arriving in China in 971, had studied and taught at the famous Nālandā University in Magadha, Zhijixiang 智吉祥 (Jñānaśīl?) and Richeng 日稱 (Sūruakīrti?, d. 1078) (for biographical information on these translators see Tansen 2002, pp. 43 - 47)

<sup>806</sup> As Tansen explains “in 983 [Tianxizai] requested that the Song court make provisions for fifty novices to learn Sanskrit and aid in the translation projects at the Institute [...] [since] he feared that the number of qualified Indian monks able to come to China might decline compared to previous periods because of the chaotic situation at the borders. In response, the court sent ten persons, including Weijing, to study at the Institute. A native of Jinling 金陵 (present-day Nanjing 南京), Weijing is reported to have shown tremendous talent in learning and understanding Sanskrit texts. Within a year, he was ordained and began participating in the translation projects as a translator-scribe” (Tansen 2002, p. 45). This informs us that the Institute functioned also as a Sanskrit learning center, where the personnel who had been selected for working in the organization was trained.

<sup>807</sup> In *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀 [T2035] we find a vivid description of the *modus operandi* adopted by the translation team. The passage in question has been translated by Tansen (*Ibidem*, p. 36); when explaining the function of the Stylist, the text says that “the *runwen* (Stylist) administers the monks and occupies the seat facing south. [He also] participates in giving style [to the translations]. (For example, the sentence “saving all suffering” 度一切苦 in the Heart Sūtra 心經 did not exist in the original Sanskrit text; and the original Sanskrit edition did not have the word “therefore” 是故 in the sentence “therefore in emptiness...” 是故空中) “[...]潤文。官於僧眾南向設位。參詳潤色 (如心經度一切苦厄一句。元無梵本。又是故空中一句。是故兩字元無梵本)» 《佛祖統紀》卷 43 (CBETA, T49, no. 2035, p. 398, b17-19)

<sup>808</sup> Even though during the previous periods state officials occasionally participated in the translation of Buddhist texts (on this phenomenon under the Tang see LI Xiaorong 2015), the Song court officialized this practice and chose for this post highly influential scholar-officials. This aimed on the one side at filling the ranks of the Institute’s staff with capable men of letters, and on the other to strengthen the imperial control on the translation work.

<sup>809</sup> The Institute functioned from 980 up to 1082. The list of the *literati* who are known to have served as Stylists include Zhang Zi 張洎 (933-996), Yang Yue 湯悅 (d.u.), Yang Li 楊礪 (930 - 999), Zhu Ang 朱昂 (925 - 1007), Liang Zhouhan 梁周翰 (929 - 1009), Zhao Anren 趙安仁 (958 - 1018), Yang Yi 楊億 (974 - 1020), Chao Jiong 晁迥 (951 - 1034), Xia Song 夏竦 (985 - 1051), Ding Wei 丁謂 (966 - 1037), Wang Qinruo 王欽若 (962 - 1025), Lü Yijian 呂夷簡 (979 - 1044), Song Shou 宋綬 (991 - 1040), Wang Ruona 王若納 (997 - 1055), Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021 - 1086), Wang Shu 王曙 (963 - 1034), Li Wei 李維 (d.u.), Fu Bi 富弼 (1004 - 1083) (see the in-depth study on the *literati*’s involvement in the Buddhist translation projects under the Northern Song by Huang Qijiang - 1990, pp. 17 - 18 - and Wu, Jiang 2016 p. 175, note 24)



(*Dazhongxiangfu fabao lu* 大中祥符法寶錄 [CBETA, A 1501]) (around 1013) in 21 fascicles which constitutes a primary source for investigating the activities of the Translation Institute and its output<sup>810</sup>; as we know from his biography in the *Song History*<sup>811</sup>, Zhao was an outstanding Hanlin Academician 翰林學士 and was particularly praised by his fellow literati for his beautiful calligraphic style.

As to Xia Song 夏竦, he was also an accomplished man of letters who came from a family of Buddhist faith<sup>812</sup> and was very well acquainted with the Buddhist texts and doctrines. He was an experienced philologist and wrote an important work on the phonology of ancient Chinese (the *Guwen sisheng yun* 古文四聲韻); his numerous other writings have been collected and edited under the title of *Wenzhuang ji* 文莊集 (*Wenzhuang* was Xia Song's posthumous name), a work which contains many important documents providing first-hand information on the activities of the Translation Institute (see for example the text of the stele inscription commissioned by the emperor *Chuanfa yuan beiming* 傳法院碑銘 in vol. 26). He was a close companion of other well-known *literati* who served as Stylists like Wang Qinruo 王欽若, Ding Wei 丁謂 and Fu Bi 富弼.

Considered the above discussion, there is little doubt that under the Northern Song the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* in 10 fascicles “transited” through the Institute for the Translation of the Sūtras, where it underwent thorough collation and revision; the text was transcribed by Zhao Anren probably sometime between 1006 to 1017 (the period in which he worked there as Stylist), and then further revised in the same institution by Xia Song some 40 years later.

Even so, the mystery remains about the printing of the text. In fact - as it is useful to remind - in the year 983 at the imperial order a printing facility (*Yinjing yuan* 印經院) had been included in the translation complex<sup>813</sup> (and it was probably for this reason that in the same year the name of the Institute was changed into “Institute for the Transmission of the Dharma” (*Chuanfa yuan* 傳法院)). This was primarily aimed at printing the *Kaibao Canon* 開寶藏 (the first printed version of the Buddhist Canon)<sup>814</sup>, but also to print the newly translated texts and catalogues which - upon the emperor's formal permission - were later inserted in the canon itself.

Considered that besides translating new scriptures the *Chuanfa yuan* was also in charge of collating the texts prior to print<sup>815</sup>, it would have been more than natural that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* (whose final revision took place in 1051) was printed and included in the first supplement of the *Kaibao Canon* (1073)<sup>816</sup>; at a close look, the kind of

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<sup>810</sup> A second fundamental catalogue of the scriptures translated under the Northern Song is the *Jingyou xinxiu fabao lu* (A Record of Dharma Treasure Newly Compiled during the Jingyou [Era]) 景祐新修法寶錄 produced by the Stylists Lü Yijian 呂夷簡 (978 - 1043) and Song Shou 宋綬 (991 - 1040) in 1036.

<sup>811</sup> *Song History* 宋史, vol. 287, *Biographies* 列傳, n. 46

<sup>812</sup> In one of his writings Xia Song himself relates that “My family for generations has worshiped the Buddha” 余家世奉佛 (*Preface to a newly collated edition of the Lotus Sūtra* 重校妙法蓮華經序, in *Wenzhuang ji* 文莊集, vol. 22)

<sup>813</sup> This printing office, which had been established on the west side of the Translation compound, functioned till 1071. After this date, due to financial constraints, the woodblocks were transferred to the Shengshou Cloister 聖壽禪院 of the Xiansheng Monastery 顯聖寺 out of Kaifeng where the printing activity was carried on in the form of private enterprise (see Du Chenghui 2015, pp. 125 - 130 and Wu, Jiang 2016, pp. 161 - 162).

<sup>814</sup> The whole process of composition of the *Kaibao Canon* was sponsored and supervised by the state. The woodblocks were carved in Chengdu (Sichuan Province) and then transported to Kaifeng in 983 (see Li Fuhua 2003 and Wu, Jiang 2016, pp. 145 - 180).

<sup>815</sup> See Du Chenghui 2015, p. 134

<sup>816</sup> The *Kaibao Canon* was finished in 983. It was followed by three supplements; “the first [...], completed circa 999, consisted of two parts: the first included translations from Indic languages made between 982 and 999, and the second contained older translations made in the Tang or earlier, which had not been listed in the *Kaiyuan Catalogue* 開元錄 [T2154] (730) but appear in *Zhenyuan Catalogue* (*Da Yang Zhenyuan xu Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 大唐貞元續開元釋教錄 [T2156], (798)) [...] The second major supplement, completed in 1073, included new translations from

colophon reproduced in T1775 is indeed typical of the early printed Buddhist texts<sup>817</sup> and normally (along with references to its collators, revisers etc.) it would also provide information about the printing. However, in this case references to printing are missing. Was it because the emperor had denied the authorization to include the document in the Canon? Was the text printed and distributed separately? These questions await further investigation; however, it is important to notice that the *Bibliographic section* of the *Song History* does register a “Sengzhao’s Explanation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in 10 fascicles”<sup>818</sup>.

What can be stated is instead that the *Chuanfa yuan* played a role in spreading the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* among a circle of high-ranking literati of Kaifeng<sup>819</sup>. As explained above, all the Stylists working at the center were accomplished *literati*; besides having a keen interest for Buddhism, many of them held well stocked libraries being among the major book collectors of their age<sup>820</sup>. It is more than natural that copies of the newly translated or collated texts made their way from the Institute onto the shelves of their private libraries and were then quoted in their own works.

Take as an example Chao Jiong 晁迥 (951 - 1034)<sup>821</sup>, the prestigious ancestor of the previously mentioned Southern Song bibliophile Chao Gongwu<sup>822</sup>. This scholar-official and Hanlin Academician who lived in the central Zhaode District 昭德坊 of Kaifeng had served as Stylist in the years 1018 - 1019 and was a close collaborator of Zhao Anren in many official literary enterprises. On the shelves of his celebrated library we find the *Collective Guanzhong Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*, a work which he frequently quotes in his *Fazang suijin lu* 法藏碎金錄 (B27, no. 153, p. 738, b11).

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1000 to 1073, as well as Chinese writings by monks that were approved by the court to be included in the canon [...]. The third supplement, produced circa 1105 - 1113, included a few new translations from 1074-1106 and Chinese writings by Tiantai, Huayan and Yogacara (Faxiang) teachers [...]” (Wu, Jiang 2016, pp. 164 - 166)

<sup>817</sup> In his study Du Chenghui examines various examples of colophons preserved in early samples of printed Buddhist texts (see Du Chenghui 2015)

<sup>818</sup> 僧肇譯《維摩經》十卷 (*Song shi* 宋史, vol. 205, *Yiwen zhi* 藝文志 pt. 4). In this case I understand *yi* 譯 (“to translate”) as a mistake for *shi* 釋 (“to explain”).

<sup>819</sup> To my knowledge, the role played by the *Chuanfa yuan* in spreading Buddhist texts among a circle of high-ranking *literati* in Kaifeng constitutes an aspect of the history of this institution that so far has not been investigated.

<sup>820</sup> For example, people like Chao Jiong 晁迥 (951 - 1034), Zhao Anren 趙安仁 (957 - 1018), Song Shou 宋綬 (991 - 1040), Zhu Ang 朱昂 (925 - 1007), Fu Bi 富弼 (1004 - 1083) - who served as Stylists at the Institute - all figure in Liu Yu’an’s dictionary of Chinese book-collectors (see LI Yu’an 1989)

<sup>821</sup> Chao Jiong (posthumous name Wenyuan 文元) together with his father Chao Quan 晁侔 first moved the clan headquarters from the Qingfeng County 清豐 in the Chan Prefecture 澶州 (nowadays the area of Puyang 濮陽 in Hunan Province) to Kaifeng in 985. Here they resided in a mansion assigned by the emperor located in the central Zhaode District 昭德坊; from then on all the descendants of the Chao clan - independently of their geographic residence - used the two characters “Zhaode” as their emblem. Chao Jiong occupied high positions in the central administration: due to his literary talent he was appointed scholar of the Imperial Academy 翰林學士 and worked as Recipient of Edicts 承旨; moreover he was for 6 years Minister in the Ministry of Rites (one of the Six Ministries that were the administrative core of the central government) 禮部尚書 and at the end of his career Junior Guardian of the Heir Apparent 太子少保.

Chao Jiong’s two younger brothers (Chao Di 晁迪 and Chao Gou 晁遘) had also joined him in Kaifeng for some time; later they moved with their own families respectively to the Juye County 巨野 in the Ji Prefecture 濟州 (the present-day area of Heze 菏澤, in Shandong Province) (Chao Gongwu descended from this branch of the family) and to Rencheng 任城, in the same Prefecture. On the history of the Chao clan - which starting from Chao Jiong produced an amazing number of writers, poets and scholars - see Zhang Jian 2004 and Zhang Jian 2006. In the discussion of Chao Jiong’s activities I have relied on the accurate chronology provided by Zhang Jian in “Appendix 1” of his study (Zhang Jian 2006).

<sup>822</sup> Chao Gongwu proudly mentions his ancestor Chao Jiong in the preface to his catalogue *Junzhai dushu zhi* 郡齋讀書誌: “Gongwu’s family starting from Mr. Wenyuan for seven generation has made literature its profession. Hence the family owns a large quantity of books” 公武家自文元公來，以翰墨為業者七世，故家多書 [...] (Chao Gongwu 1990, p. 15)

As we know from his biography in the *Song History*, “[Chao] Jiong was skilled in the techniques of breathing and cultivating life, he mastered the Buddhist and Taoist texts”<sup>823</sup>. In his late years he was particularly absorbed in the study of the Buddhist scriptures; as it is related by Wang Yingling 王應麟 (1223 - 1296):

宣德門前天街東第四昭德坊，晁文元公宅。致政後闢小園，號養素園。多閱佛書，起密嚴堂。

At the Xuande [city] gate, in the fourth [residence] of the Zhao District on the Qiantian Street [is] the abode of Chao Wenyuan (viz. Chao Jiong). After retirement he [gave orders] to construct a small [internal] garden which he called Garden of the Cultivation of the Authentic [Nature] (*Yangsù yuán* 養素園). He read many Buddhist texts and erected the Hall of the Secret Adornment (*Miyan tang* 密嚴堂)<sup>824</sup>.

While the name of the garden clearly alludes to the Taoist tradition of self-cultivation, that of the hall is of evident Buddhist provenance and recalls the *Ghana-vyūha-sūtra* (*Sūtra of the Secret Adornment*) 大乘密嚴經. It was probably in such hall that Chao had stocked the Buddhist texts of his vast collection, included the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* on which he liked to ponder during his old age.

According to some sources, also the great Northern Song scholar and reformer Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021 - 1086) had served for some time as Stylist at the Translation Institute<sup>825</sup>. And it seems that he too was well acquainted with the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*; the *Sun gong tan pu* 孫公談圃 (1101) relates the following interesting case:

荊公為江西漕，夢小龍呼相公，求夾注《維摩經》十卷。久而忘之。後至友人家，見佛堂中有是經，因錄而送廟。及在相府，夢小龍來謝。

Mr. Jing (i.e. Wang Anshi), who was the Fiscal Commissioner of Jiangxi, [once] dreamed a little dragon calling him and asking to obtain the *Annotated Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in 10 fascicles. [Mr. Jing] for long time forgot about that, [but] afterwards he went to a friend's house and saw that in his Buddhist Hall there was such scripture. Hence he copied it and sent it to the temple. Then [it happened that] while he was in his office he dreamed the little dragon coming [again] to thank him<sup>826</sup>.

Again we find an explicit reference to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* in 10 fascicles made by a scholar occupying high ranks in the central government. The term “little dragon” (*xiaolong* 小龍) could also indicate an attendant of the Dragon Diagram Hall (*Longtu ge* 龍圖閣), a library established between 1008 and 1016 to house official documents from the second reign (976 - 997); hence it could be that Wang Anshi's dream was but a playful allusion to the fact that some attendant at this institution had asked him to find the text in question. Wang Anshi's familiarity with the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is confirmed by the fact that he had composed a commentary in 3 fascicles on it, a work that we find registered in the *Bibliographical Section* of the *Song History*<sup>827</sup>.

<sup>823</sup> “迴善吐納養生之術，通釋、老書[...]” (*Song History* 宋史, vol. 305, *Biographies* 列傳, n. 64)

<sup>824</sup> *Kunxue jiwen* 困學紀聞, vol. 20 (*Zashi* 雜識)

<sup>825</sup> See Wang Zijian's 王志堅 (1576 - 1633) *Si liu fahai* 四六法海, vol. 3. Cf. also Wu, Jiang 2016, p. 175, note 28

<sup>826</sup> *Sun gong tan pu* (*Repository of Conversations with Mr. Sun*) 孫公談圃, vol. 1 (this is the written record of a series of conversations between the Northern Song poet Sun Sheng 孫昇 (1038 - 1099) and his fellow *literatus* Liu Yanshi 劉延世 produced by the latter in 1101).

<sup>827</sup> “王安石注《維摩詰經》三卷” (*Song shi* 宋史, vol. 205, *Yiwen zhi* 藝文志 pt. 4)

While we do not know whether the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* was eventually included in the *Kaibao Canon*, two centuries later we find it recorded in the *Catalogue of the Zhiyuan Era* 至元錄<sup>828</sup> and then included in the *Yongle Northern Canon* 永樂北藏 produced circa 1440 (Ming Dynasty)<sup>829</sup>; reproduced with small variants in the *Taishō Canon* and *Zhonghua dazang jing* 中華大藏經<sup>830</sup>, this represents the received version of the text.

Even though starting from the Ming the text was “manipulated” again (in fact, incorporating a text into the Chinese Buddhist canon did not guarantee textual stability), there are good reasons to believe that the Northern Song represented a key passage in the history of the transmission of the text: it was probably the collation and revision operated at the Institute for the Translation of the Sūtras that roughly gave the text its present outlook.

As we have previously seen, in the mid-Tang period the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was saved from oblivion by Daoye 道液, a monk deeply involved in the translation and proselytizing activity who still managed to oppose the tide of the new “creative” exegesis initiated during the Sui by exegetes like Zhiyi<sup>831</sup>; the popularity of his *Guanzhong Shu* [T2777] among the neophyte monks and laymen (albeit surely not among the Buddhist intelligentsia) allowed those early annotations by Kumārajīva and his disciples to widely circulate and survive.

Under the Northern Song this exegesis was “saved” again; this time by a state sponsored institution which was in charge of translating the Buddhist texts newly introduced from India and collate the scriptures that were to be included in the *Kaibao Canon*. Scholars agree on the fact that this enterprise - which along the years produced a remarkable amount of translations - had very little impact on Song Buddhism; the reasons are explained by Tansen as follows:

The factor ultimately responsible for the failure of the Song Buddhist translation [...] was the definitive form that Chinese Buddhist schools were able to attain during the Song period that made translated Indic texts and their contents virtually irrelevant to the contemporary Buddhist

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<sup>828</sup> The complete name of this work is *Zhiyuan fabao kantong zonglu* 至元法寶勘同總錄 (A Revised General Catalogue of the Dharma-Treasure [Compiled during the] Zhiyuan Era [of the Yuan Dynasty]) (1264 - 1294); it is a comparative catalogue of Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist canons along with a reconstitution of Sanskrit titles. Its editing was supported by Kublai Khan (d. 1294) and undertaken (starting from 1285) by an equipte of Chinese, Tibetan and Uighur Buddhists directed by the monk Shiqing Jixiang 釋慶吉祥. This extensive catalogue accompanied the printing of two massive Yuan editions of the Buddhist canon: the first was a Tangut edition, the *Xixia Triptaka* 西夏藏, completed in 1302; the second was the “complete” Chinese edition known as the *Qisha Triptaka* 磧砂藏.

<sup>829</sup> Wang Jianjun has challenged the common view that *Zhu Weimojiejing* was first included in the *Yongle Northern Canon* and argued instead that it was first included in the *Yongle Southern Canon* 永樂南藏 produced in 1420 (cf. Wang Jianjun 2011, p. 30 - 31).

<sup>830</sup> Cf. on this Wang Jianjun 2011, pp. 30 - 32. The analysis and comparison of the various print editions of *Zhu Weimojie jing* exceeds the scope of this thesis and I will probably deal with it in the future in a separate study. It bears mention, however, that starting from the Ming the scripture was rearranged into various editions some of which were based on an “extended version” of the text (*guang ben* 廣本) and some other on an “abridged” one (*lie ben* 略本). The texts included respectively in *Taishō Tripiṭaka* 大藏經, *Manji Zōkuzōkyō* 卅字續藏 (aka *Dai Nihon Zōkuzōkyō* 大日本續藏經) and *Zhonghua da zang jing* 中華大藏經 (reprinted and distributed in 1989 by the Shanghai guji chubanshe) are all based on the extended version (for the latter, cf. the entry in the *General Index of the Zhonghua da zang jing*: 「注維摩經十卷 (後秦僧肇述并序, 採廣本. [...])」《中華大藏經總目錄》卷 4 (CBETA, B35, no. 194, p. 491, a14)); instead, the version printed in the summer 1887 in Nanjing by the Jinling Buddhist Press 金陵刻經處 directed by Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (in 8 fascicles) is based on the abridged one (cf. Kimura Senshō 1986, p. 15; on the history of Yang Wenhui’s Buddhist Press see Wu Yankang 2006).

<sup>831</sup> As Tansen well explains “The accurate translation of Indic texts and their faithful interpretation in accordance to the original intent of their Indian authors had [...] exemplified the Northern and Southern Dynasties. The Sui and Tang commentators, on the other hand, ‘clearly felt themselves free to interpret the sūtras of their schools on the basis of their own religious experience, often showing no concern whether a particular interpretation was at all feasible from the standpoint of the original text.’” (Tansen 2002, p. 67)

clergy in China. [...] the fact is that their translations failed to circulate among the Song Buddhist community. Indeed, it seems that the translations produced by the Institute were not meant for the Buddhist clergy in China, but were only used to demonstrate the state's emphasis on literary learning<sup>832</sup> and employed in its diplomatic relations with neighboring countries<sup>833</sup>.

The popularity of Chinese Buddhist schools emphasizing indigenous teachings and texts during the Song period testifies to the evolution of Chinese Buddhism away from the scholastic study of Indic texts prevalent in China during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period. This evolution, which began taking concrete form during the Sui-Tang period, was marked by the growing popularity of indigenous practices, teachings, and texts as well as by the diminishing significance of Indian translators and transmitters of Buddhist doctrines.

In the eyes of the Song clergy the Guanzhong interpretation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was no doubt too much close to the "Indian root" from which the Chinese Buddhist establishment had now almost completely shifted away<sup>834</sup>. This notwithstanding, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* survived again; not so much as a celebrated emblem of the heroic phase of Buddhist introduction to China but rather as a neglected vestige of a kind of Buddhism that had already had its day. The scripture was snatched from oblivion more for state reasons (*viz.* the assertion of the Song cultural supremacy) than for the real interest it could generate among the Buddhist devotees or the Buddhist intelligentsia; and it was indeed a twist of fate that the vicissitudes it went through under the Northern Song regarded more the Confucian scholars than the Buddhist exegetes.

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<sup>832</sup> The creation of the *Kaibao Canon* must be contextualized in the official Northern Song strategy of sponsoring large-scale literary projects (among them are the "Four Great Works of the Song", *viz.* *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽, *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華 and *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜) which aimed on the one side at strengthening the role of Wen 文 (literary/civil) over Wu 武 (the military) and on the other at affirming the cultural supremacy of the dynasty over its powerful rivals (the Khitan - Liao 遼 (916 - 1125) - and the Tangut - Xixia 西夏 (1038 - 1227) -) and among its neighbouring countries (cf. Tansen 2002, p. 71).

Many of the literati who served as Stylists at the Translation Institute also worked at other literary projects, e.g. Wang Qinruo 王欽若 and Yang Yi 楊億 were among the compilers of the *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜; moreover, the same two scholars along with Zhao Anren 趙安仁, Chao Jiong 晁迥 and others compiled the official history of the emperors Taizu 太祖 and Taizong 太宗.

<sup>833</sup> One of the main functions of the *Kaibao Canon* was as gift to other countries, a tangible emblem of the Song's cultural superiority. It also bears mention that the Translation Institute functioned under the Honglu si 鴻臚寺, the bureau in charge of diplomatic affairs (cf. Tansen 2002, p. 41)

<sup>834</sup> This shift is also reflected in the open disregard towards foreign and Chinese translators in the formation of the Chinese patriarchate, e.g. Kumārajīva was never recognized as patriarch of the Tiantai school, even though he had produced the Chinese version of the *Lotus Sūtra* upon which the Tiantai philosophical system had been constructed; in the same way, Xuanzang - who had translated the basic texts of the Faxiang sect - was never recognized as patriarch of his own school (cf. on this Tansen 2002, pp. 67 - 68)

## CONCLUSION

What is the specific commentarial approach developed by the three main authors of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*? How do these interpretations interact with each-other? What significance do they bear within the wider cultural background of the early 5<sup>th</sup> century China? In which ways was the practice of Buddhist translation related to the exegetical one and how did they interact with one another? What was the role played by exegesis in the cultural adaptation of Buddhism to the Chinese *milieu*? Which elements of the Chinese mainstream cultural tradition served as a “bridge” for approaching and “decoding” Indian ideas and systems of thought? How and for what reasons were the materials of the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* edited, assembled and transmitted through the ages? These have been some of the key questions that have guided the inquiry undertaken in this thesis. Even though the main focus of my research has been the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*, the analysis of this text has led me to reflect upon broader themes related to the inter-cultural transmission of religious and philosophical ideas from India and Central Asia to China and has allowed me to sketch a more complex and nuanced picture of some of the cultural mechanisms underlying what is generically called “sinification of Buddhism” during the specific historical period considered.

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* has been analyzed under three different perspectives, each of those being articulated into one chapter and centered upon a specific theme, namely 1. **translation**; 2. **interpretation**; 3. **editing and transmission**. The investigation of the first theme has led me to consider the organization of the translation activity during the Kumārajīva’s era under a historical viewpoint and to analyze it as a distinctive cultural phenomenon embedded in a specific social and political context. The study of the interpretative strategies that were adopted has made it possible to step into the “workshop” of consummate exegetes like Kumārajīva, Sengzhao and Daosheng (the three main authors of the *Commentary*), examine their work tools and observe the mastery with which they remodeled the message of the sūtra text into new original interpretative works. The reconstruction of the editing and transmission process of the text has allowed me to follow the vicissitudes the materials belonging to the Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* went through before being transmitted to us in the present outlook; these form a long, compelling drama crowded with main actors and extras - translators and exegete-monks, but also kings, dukes, Japanese and Korean student-monks and Chinese book collectors and scholar-officials - that makes it possible to observe some of the dynamics leading to the selection, assembling and transmission of Buddhist exegetical works through Chinese history.

As a conclusion, let me now highlight some of the most interesting findings emerged from my research keeping the above mentioned three-fold perspective as reference.

### **The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* and the study of the Buddhist translation activity**

The transmission of the doctrine is a fundamental Buddhist activity that falls into the category of *dharmadāna* (lit. offering of the teaching). The adoption of translation as the main mode of transmission - which is by no means obvious<sup>835</sup> - became one of the central features of official Chinese Buddhism. The development of its approaches and techniques forms a long process marked by continuous improvement and adaptation to new social and historical circumstances,

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<sup>835</sup> As we know, in other countries Buddhist texts were studied (or at least recited) in their original language, e.g. in Ceylon and South-East Asia Buddhist even today the Buddhist texts are studied in the first place in Pāli (on this topic cf. de Jong 1968, pp. 52 - 53). The sources reveal that in China there was at least one eminent advocate of this solution, namely the monk Yancong 彦琮 (557-610) who proposed that all clerics study the Sanskrit language and read the sacred scriptures in their original version; translations could be used for spreading the religion among common people (cf. Yancong’s treatise *Bian zheng lun* 辯正論 partially preserved in his biography in *Xu Gaosheng zhuan* 續高僧傳 [T2060], vol. 2, p. 436, b15-p. 439, c16. See also Kenneth Chen 1960, p. 184, Wang Wenyan 1984, pp. 236 - 248 and Zacchetti 1996, p. 357, n. 36).

and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* can be considered as a milepost on this long path. The study of its composition has revealed that Kumārajīva's translation enterprise profited from previous translation experiences and at the same time introduced important improvements and innovations, its major breakthrough consisting in the accurate and comprehensive oral explanations delivered on the text that were later rearranged in the form of interlinear commentaries.

The study of the sources has strongly suggested that it was Dao'an who first removed the previously translated Buddhist texts from the sacred sphere of the Sages of old and started to analyze them with the same philological rigor the Chinese scholars used to apply to the study of the Classics; this triggered an in-depth reflection on the translation activity itself which was enriched with new important issues including the chronological gap between the age of composition and the actual era, the Indo-Chinese cultural and linguistic divide etc. The elaboration of a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics involved in the production of Buddhist translations in turn fostered a careful re-organization of the translation ground and its procedures.

From a broader perspective it can be observed how in China the practice of Buddhist translation soon formed a coherent tradition characterized by a constant critical self-reflection: translators and exegetes, whenever facing new problems, always "looked back" in search of models that could help find out viable solutions. As we have seen, at least up to Dao'an's age these "models" were not confined to the Buddhist milieu but included also the Confucian tradition which at that time constituted the mainstream cultural force consisting of a series of literary conventions and practices (the study of the Classics and their exegesis), an education system based on them and a system of values built upon moral relations that constituted the heart of social organization. Dao'an and his collaborators constantly looked at the Confucian exegesis of the ancient Classics as a mirror for reflecting upon the different ways of explaining previously translated Buddhist texts or to organize the translation of new scriptures. This *modus operandi* became obsolete during the Kumārajīva's age, when the Chinese gained a more direct and un-mediated access to the Sanskrit texts and their meaning.

The organization of the translation activity was also influenced by a number of "external factors" that have been sketched out in this work. In particular, on the one hand the geopolitical situation directly influenced the influx of foreign missionaries and texts from the Western Regions; on the other hand, the religious and cultural policies put forward by those in power determined the modes of patronage over the Buddhist samgha, and thus influenced the organization of its activities.

### **The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* and the study of Buddhist exegesis**

This research has shown that tradition plays a key role also in the exegetical activity. As we have seen, Dao'an was in favor of a literal translation of the foreign texts; whenever needed, further information clarifying single terms or expressions had to be asked to the "issuer" of the text and then added in *ad hoc* annotations written in small characters below the commented units. Under the Later Qin this practice expanded into articulated and comprehensive comments. The scope of the oral explanation also broadened considerably; in fact, Kumārajīva's exegesis aimed both at clarifying the text for the benefit of the scribes and exegetes involved in the actual translation work, and at introducing the audience of monks and laymen attending the translation ground to the cultural and religious world portrayed in the scripture that was being translated. Upon analyzing the various elements included in such explanation, we can argue that the explanation of many Sanskrit terms and the references to the Sanskrit version of the text were addressed *in primis* to the specialized personnel involved in the translation, while the great deal of references to the cultural context and the narrative digressions were mainly addressed to a broader public of non-specialists. As a whole, Kumārajīva's commentary represents an interesting blend of a great variety of exegetical materials (lexical explications, philosophical argumentations, metaphors, apologues, parables etc.) and shows the employment of different



explanatory devices and registers which were probably intended to function as a sort of “skillful means” allowing everyone in the audience to access the treasury of the Buddhist teachings contained in the sūtra independently of his level of education.

As to the exegesis elaborated by Kumārajīva’s Chinese disciples, this was no doubt strongly influenced by Confucianism, particularly in its Xuanxue formulation<sup>836</sup>. In fact, this philosophical tradition provided the fertile philosophical terrain in which their new speculative elaborations and exegetical approaches could grow and develop<sup>837</sup>. It is certainly true that Dao’an’s own writings were characterized by an abundance of Xuanxue “phrasings”, but these are often arranged into utterly obscure formulations in which the mystical afflatus prevails on philosophical argumentation<sup>838</sup>; instead, Sengzhao and Daosheng were able to re-elaborate these elements into coherent patterns of thought and effective heuristic methods; something which allowed for the creation of new kinds of exegesis at the same time deeply grounded in the Chinese philosophical tradition and not in contradiction to the Indian Buddhist roots.

The exegetical styles and formats used by the Chinese exegetes have constituted one of the research topics of this work. As a matter of fact, the commentarial formats adopted by Sengzhao and Daosheng (the earlier *zhu* 注 - “inter-linear commentary” - and the new *yishu* 義疏 - “exposition of meaning commentary” - whose origins still remain quite mysterious) were different from those traditionally used in India. Robinson aptly pointed out in his *Mādhyamika in India and China* that “a number of Indian features were not adopted by Chinese Mādhyamikas, the most obvious of which is Indian literary forms. [...] Evidently the gentlemen of the time found it easier to change their religion than their literary ideas”<sup>839</sup>. This choice was evidently due to the fact that since the remote past the writing and literary expression had emerged as one of the most fundamental characterizing elements of the Chinese identity<sup>840</sup>, something which could not be “bargained” in the context of the encounter and cultural exchange with India.

As I have evidenced in this work, the different exegetical approaches and formats mentioned above are related in many ways to the Chinese regional cultures flourished during a long period of political division, *in primis* the great cultural divide between the Northern plain and the South-East area<sup>841</sup>. The non-Han clans ruling over Northern China greatly promoted the translation activity and hence indirectly fostered the development of exegetical formats related to it (viz. the inter-linear commentary focusing on literal explanation); this kind of approach was also favored

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<sup>836</sup> On the fact that Xuanxue was basically a metamorphosis of Confucianism see Zürcher 2007, p. 87: “Especially since Xuanxue is still sometimes regarded as a kind of revived Daoism, it is useful to remember that Dark Learning was both created by and intended for literati, i.e. politicians and state officials, and definitely not by Daoist masters, hermits or cave-dwelling mystics”. Tang Yongtong also warned that: “Many people regard Xuanxue as a satellite of the Lao and the Zhuang philosophy, but they have forgotten that it is one of the metamorphosis of the Ru School (i.e. Confucian School)” (Tang Yongtong 1947, p. 126).

<sup>837</sup> It will be useful to remind that the generic term “Xuanxue Buddhism” largely used in research literature actually includes a great variety of Buddhist exegetical and philosophical elaborations whose different features ought to be investigated and discussed case by case avoiding generalization.

<sup>838</sup> For some examples see the three important Prajñāpāramitā prefaces by Dao’an translated in Hurvitz and Link 1974.

<sup>839</sup> Robinson 1967, p. 161

<sup>840</sup> The symbolic power of the Chinese written expression and the key role played by it in the construction of a social and political order has been well described by Lewis: “[...] the ultimate importance of writing to the Chinese empire and imperial civilization did not derive from its administrative role. Rather the Chinese empire, including its artistic and religious versions, was based on an imaginary realm created within texts. These texts, couched in an artificial language above the local world of spoken dialects, created a model of society against which actual institutions were measured. More important, they provided the basis of an educational program that embedded the vision of empire within the upper reaches of local communities. A shared commitment to these texts thus created the links between the imperial system and localities [...]” (Lewis 1999, p. 4)

<sup>841</sup> The long period of political division extended from the fall of the Eastern Han 東漢 (220 AD) to the Sui 隋 reunification of 589 (counting the only exception of the Western Jin era 西晉 (265 - 316) that saw the empire united again for some 50 years). It was during this span of time that the Buddhist introduction to China (at least, the decisive phase of this process) took place.

by the Confucian philological tradition previously developed by exegetes like Ma Rong 馬融 (79 - 166) and Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127 - 200) which had remained particularly strong in the north<sup>842</sup>. Instead, the Jiangnan 江南 (the area “south of the Yangzi river”) after the Southward migration of the Northern Chinese gentry<sup>843</sup> had become the gathering place of the Xuanxue adepts who were more inclined towards a style of scholarship based on philosophical speculation and oral debates<sup>844</sup>. Daosheng’s approach to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* can no doubt be better understood and explained when contextualized in this Southern intellectual milieu. The same holds true also for the works of later exegetes considered in this work like Zhiyi 智顗 (538 - 597) and Jizang 吉藏 (549 - 623), both scholars of Southern cultural background.

The use of specific formats, literary styles and argumentative patterns in the field of Chinese Buddhist exegesis (but more in general in Chinese philosophy) so far has been little studied: often the “content” of the writings has been given preeminence over the forms and modes of expression (the “container”), giving for granted that certain messages could be simply “extracted” from their containing structures and then cross-culturally compared. However, writing and its forms are always embedded in a social and political context whose study often provides the true key for sizing the meaning. In his fascinating studies on the pre-Qin literature Guo Changbao (professor at the Beijing Normal University) has made a great contribution to the development of a culturally oriented analysis of literary forms<sup>845</sup>; as to Western sinology, after Wagner’s pioneering studies on Wang Bi’s *Laozi Commentary* in which the study of the parallel prose plays a key role, the interest for the modes of expression as culturally determined phenomena has steadily grown.<sup>846</sup> In my opinion, this branch of studies has the potential for opening up new research perspectives into already known materials and allow for new important findings.

### **The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Commentary: editing and transmission of a collective Buddhist commentary**

The study of the editing and transmission process of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Commentary has allowed to clarify some important passages in the formation of the received text (even though, due to the shortage of documentary evidence, many aspects of this process still remain in the dark) and, in more general terms, has permitted to gain an insight into some of the mechanisms regulating the transmission of Buddhist scriptures through Chinese history.

<sup>842</sup> Cf. on this also Tang Yongtong 2000, vol. 1, p. 416

<sup>843</sup> On this fundamental historical and social phenomenon see Lewis 2009, p. 6: “The Han policy of resettling nomadic tribes inside the borders of China in order to incorporate them into its expeditionary armies led to an increasing intermixture of Chinese with non-Chinese cultures in the Yellow River basin. It also set off the first wave of southward flight. Several million Chinese, mostly peasants, moved south during the last century of the Han, and this migration accelerated after the dynasty fell in a.d. 220. By 320 several million more Chinese had settled in the lower Yangzi River valley. The Yellow River basin became the scene of constant warfare between states founded by rulers from non-Han tribes, culminating in the sacking of the old imperial capitals of Luoyang in 311 and Chang’an in 317. Between 280 and 464, the registered population of the Yangzi valley and points south increased five-fold, largely due to migration, and Jiangnan—the area “south of the Yangzi”—became a major center of Chinese culture”.

<sup>844</sup> As we have seen, these important cultural differences became a key concern for the Sui emperor Yang Di 煬帝 (569 - 618) who - upon territorial reunification - set out to reorganize religion and put it under more strict official control. He first established official temples where he invited the most outstanding Buddhist exegetes of his times (like Zhiyi) and commissioned them exegetical works that were to constitute a sort of “official” interpretations of some Buddhist sūtras; later on - after being proclaimed Crown Prince - he founded in Chang’an the Riyan Temple 日嚴寺 where he accommodated many eminent monks from the south with the clear intention of spreading the southern exegesis to the north. This process of “fusion” of different regionally characterized Buddhist traditions will result into the formation of the great Sinitic Buddhist sects of Tang dynasty.

<sup>845</sup> Guo’s most representative work is Guo 2009. As Guo has explained to me (private e-mail dating August 4, 2015), to the present day this kind of research concentrates mostly on the pre-Qin and Han periods and is not yet very developed.

<sup>846</sup> See for example Gents and Meyer (eds.) 2015

Given that the whole discussion of this topic has been based on the search and discussion of various pieces of textual evidence (the “traces” left by our *Commentary* along history), let me draw some conclusions by focusing on the nature and significance of the sources employed.

Interestingly, the “official documents” (i.e. texts officially produced by the Buddhist establishment under the patronage of the political power) included in the Canon have provided little help to my investigation, as the most relevant pieces of information have been gathered from extra-canonical sources, including a number of manuscripts from Dunhuang and Turfan<sup>847</sup>, travel diaries and catalogues compiled by foreign monks visiting China under the Tang and documents related to the world of Tang and Song Chinese private libraries.

The manuscript fragments from Dunhuang and Turfan related to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* recently collected by Zheng Acai have allowed for a more precise account of the early history of our text<sup>848</sup>, evidencing the fact that the three commentaries (respectively by Kumārajīva, Sengzhao and Daosheng) circulated independently for some time before being assembled into collective editions; most probably, Kumārajīva and Sengzhao’s commentaries were combined first, and Daosheng’s one was added later. These new collective editions of the *Commentary* started to gain prominence under the Tang, and quickly supplanted the independent commentaries whose circulation sensibly decreased.

The Dunhuang caves have also returned two works authored by Daoye 道液 (mid-Tang dynasty) (viz. the *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 [T 2777] and the *Jingming jing Guanzhong shichao* 淨名經關中釋抄 [T 2778]). These commentaries, which had been previously little studied by scholars<sup>849</sup>, have allowed me to better explain and contextualize the revival of the old Guanzhong exegesis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* during the mid-Tang period and to formulate some hypothesis on the composition of *Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經 [T1775].

A third important set of documents from Dunhuang that has been used in my inquiry is made of manuscripts reproducing the notes jotted down by the śramaṇa Tiqing 體請 from the Chongfu Monastery 崇福寺 in the spring of 767 while attending one or more lectures on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* at the Zisheng Temple 資聖寺 of Chang’an. These annotations had previously attracted very little attention; yet, as we have seen, they acquire a new evidential importance when considered as a witness of the “new” exegesis developed in that temple precisely during those years by Daoye and other monks.

The study of the above mentioned documents has made it clear that the development of Chinese Buddhist exegesis was never linear and materials that were put aside by the mainstream exegetical tradition could be rediscovered and valued during later ages. Generally speaking, the mainstream commentarial tradition evolved from the early inter-linear formats to the new interpretative ones (*yishu* 義疏) typical of the Southern dynasties which were less and less concerned about the literal meaning of the text and aimed primarily at developing personal religious views and establishing original sets of doctrines. The exegetical history of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* indeed followed this pattern; however, after the appearance of many voluminous and intricate interpretative commentaries hardly accessible to the common reader, Daoye’s *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 [T 2777] marked a rediscovery and valorization of the early literal exegesis and a new popularity of the old Guanzhong interpretation among neophyte monks and laymen.

The non-linearity in the development of Chinese exegesis is often related to the coexistence in Chinese Buddhism of a “Great Tradition” maintained by the religious élite and a huge number of

<sup>847</sup> The Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts were discovered at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (for an overview of this topic cf. Wilkinson 2000, pp. 826 - 835). The manuscripts found in Turfan 吐魯番 date from 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, whereas those found in the Mogao caves in Dunhuang 敦煌莫高窟藏經洞 range from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD.

<sup>848</sup> Cf. Zheng Acai 2016 (a) and 2018

<sup>849</sup> Even so, it bears mention that Li Ming’s collation of *Jingming jing jijie Guanzhong shu* 淨名經集解關中疏 (cf. Li Ming 1996 and 1997) no doubt represents a substantial contribution to the study of the text.

poorly documented “little traditions”<sup>850</sup> that can in many ways significantly diverge from it. Daoye was certainly a monk of the establishment; yet, the works he composed for the benefit of a popular public (these were actually used as a sort of textbooks by other teachers of the same monastery) are no doubt to be considered as belonging to one of the “small traditions”. And it is significant - in this regard - that such texts were practically ignored by the official sources, and were mentioned only in catalogues and travel diaries authored by foreign monks travelling to China (e.g. Ennin, 圓仁 (794 - 864), Jōgyō 常曉 (d. 865), Ūich’ōn 義天 (1055 - 1101) etc.) which *inter alia* indirectly confirmed their popularity and large geographical diffusion.

Some important findings on the textual history of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* have come from investigation into the little frequented world of ancient private libraries; this is a fascinating field of studies that, in my opinion, could lead to the discovery of missing pieces of many other similar “puzzles” regarding the transmission of Buddhist scriptures.

Given that the Buddhist scholarly production (among which translations and commentaries surely represent primary items) was largely financed by the state, it is no wonder that the manuscript works thus produced were mainly preserved in official libraries (including monastic libraries and royal libraries)<sup>851</sup>. However, starting from the Tang the private libraries played an increasingly important role in the preservation and transmission of scriptures<sup>852</sup>; this is even more so during the Song when, due to the rapid diffusion of printing and the more affordable prices of printed copies, private book collections multiplied. It also bears mentions that library owners were usually men of vast eruditions who made great efforts for correcting the numerous mistakes found in the texts, thus producing over time accurate and reliable versions of many important works.

As we have seen in this study, the vast library established by Li Bi 李泌 (722 - 789) in the city of Chang’an and passed down to his son Li Fan 李繁 who moved it to Suizhou 隨州 provided us with the earliest traces of the 10 fascicles version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*. Later on under the Northern Song we have found this work again on the shelves of Chao Jiong’s 晁迥 (951-1034) library located in the central Zhaode District 昭德坊 of Bianjing 汴京 (Kaifeng), and it is likely that also other *litterati* of this period working at the “Institute for the Translation of the Sūtras” (*Yi jing yuan* 譯經院) - where, as I discovered analyzing a colophon included in the text, the *Commentary* was collated, transcribed as revised - owned copies of it in their own private collections. Finally, under the Southern Song we have found the commentary in the important catalogue *Junzhai dushu zhi* 郡齋讀書誌 (“*Record of reading books at the Commandery Study*”) - the first extant Chinese private library catalogue - in which Chao Gongwu 晁公武 (1105 - 1180) carefully registered the books of his own library.

<sup>850</sup> The terms “Great Tradition” and “little traditions” have been coined by Zürcher, who pointed out that “Chinese Buddhism as presented by our sources is representative of the Great Tradition within medieval Chinese Buddhism, and that Great Tradition, however impressive, was less than skin-deep. It was carried on by a very small, highly literate élite within the clergy [...]” (《Perspectives in the Study of Chinese Buddhism》, in Zürcher 2013, p. 266). Along with this Great Tradition innumerable “little traditions” existed, that are defined by the Dutch scholar as “local manifestations of Buddhist life as it existed among the people, far removed from that world of texts, treatises, learned doctors, impressive rituals and rich endowments?” (*Ibidem*, p. 266). In the present discussion I will adopt a broader definition of this last term, including in it also the textual traditions that were simply peripheral to the main activities of the clerical establishment, like for example the education of neophyte monks and laymen.

<sup>851</sup> For a survey of the major official libraries where Buddhist manuscripts were stored in Medieval China see WANG Xiang 2014.

<sup>852</sup> As Wilkinson pointed out “private libraries had been in existence [in China] since at least the Han, if not before, but only the very rich could afford them because of the rarity and high price of the books. There were 20 or 30 book collectors in the Tang, but private collections became more common only during the Song” (Wilkinson 2000, p. 265).

It is certainly true that private libraries had played a role in cultural history even before the Tang (e.g. Wang Bi’s 王弼 (226 - 249) intellectual breakthrough largely relied upon the substantial collection of books inherited from his uncle Wang Can 王粲 (177 - 217). Cf. on this Wagner 2000, pp. 12 - 13 and 20; Chen Dedi 2011, p. 25), but on a much more limited scale.

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## ACADEMIC SUMMARY

This thesis undertakes an in-depth analysis of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* (Zhu Weimojie jing 注維摩詰經 [T1775]), a collection of explanatory annotations on the Chinese version of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (406 AD) by the great Kuchean translator Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (344-413) and two of his Chinese “disciples”, namely Sengzhao 僧肇 (384-414) and Daosheng 道生 (ca 355-434).

The text is analyzed and discussed from a number of different perspectives, each of those being articulated into one chapter and centered upon a specific concept. These are: 1. **translation**; 2. **interpretation**; 3. **editing and transmission**.

**The first chapter** focuses on translation. The materials included in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* represent in part a “side-product” of the translation process as it was organized at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and for this reason I start with sketching out a “genealogy” of the Buddhist translation activity in the city of Chang’an, investigating the evolution of its approaches and techniques. In particular, I stress the influence of Dao’an’s 道安 (312-385) organization of the translation work under the Former Qin 前秦 (350-394) on Kumārajīva’s translation enterprise. In fact, not only did the Kuchean master benefit from the precious help of a highly experienced group of Chinese collaborators trained under Dao’an, but he also profited from the deep critical reflections of the old Chinese monk on many practical issues involved in the translation activity which were in part crystallized in the set of guidelines known as “the five instances of losing the source and three difficulties” (*wu shiben, san buyi* 五失本, 三不易).

**The second chapter** focuses on interpretation. It examines the three major commentaries included in *Zhu Weimojie jing* [T1775] also in the light of the cultural background and the life trajectory of each author. Along with the content of the three commentaries, my analysis puts a special emphasis on the cultural modes of reception, something which entails a discussion of the “formal features” of those works.

**Kumārajīva’s commentary** - My analysis shows that Kumārajīva’s exegesis aims at bridging the cultural gap and introducing the Chinese audience to the broader Indian context in which Buddhism as a religion and a way of life had arisen and developed. In more technical terms, Kumārajīva’s exegesis is constructed upon a number of “building blocks” which I analyze in this section.

On a basic level the sūtra text is elucidated through **explanations of Sanskrit words** - often enriched by etymologies and examples - and occasional **references to the Sanskrit text** (usually introduced by the expression “the Sanskrit version says” *fanben yun* 梵本云) made in order to better specify the meaning of certain words and back up assessments (some of which clearly derogatory) of the corresponding Chinese terms chosen by the Chinese exegetes or scribes in the translation.

Kumārajīva enriches this basic exegesis through *ad hoc* “expansions” providing a variety of additional materials. One of these expansions, which might be called “**elucidation of categories**”, consists in discussing the whole category of items in which a specific term found in the sūtra text was traditionally included (e.g. the explanation of the term “material nourishment” 揣食 leads to the discussion of all “four kinds of nourishments” 四食). Other expansions supply background information on **Indian society, lore and traditions**, or **background information on the characters** which are mentioned in the text (both Buddhist and non-Buddhist). **Anecdotes** are also told often providing a dramatized explanation of an abstract conception presented in the sūtra; in other cases, key philosophical concepts are instead elucidated through proper **philosophical and doctrinal discussions**.



As a whole, Kumārajīva's exegesis constitutes a captivating blend of Indian patterns of oral exposition, Central Asian storytelling and Chinese philological exercise. The most evident proof of its oral origins is to be found in some *question-and-answer debates* between Kumārajīva and the audience that were recorded by the scribes and have been preserved within the text.

**Sengzhao's commentary** - While Kumārajīva's commentary largely derives from the oral exegesis he performed side by side with the translation of the sūtra, the materials included in Sengzhao's commentary are more varied. They comprise at least three components. The first one includes *speculative passages* in which philosophical conceptions are expressed through carefully constructed argumentative structures mainly written in the parallel prose style (*pianwen* 駢文). These materials, which are based upon a comprehensive and highly structured understanding of the sūtra as a coherent unit, form a continuum with the Xuanxue exegesis and constitute perhaps the most original part of Sengzhao's commentary; in fact, by grafting the Indian Mādhyamika philosophy into these patterns familiar to the Chinese mind, the Chinese monk is able to "betray" the original formulation while saving and cross-culturally transmitting its inner meaning.

The second component of Sengzhao's commentary is made of *passages that show a clear connection to Kumārajīva's commentary*; they include Sengzhao's paraphrases of the Kuchean master's explanations as well as entries relating information on Sanskrit terms, Indian traditions, parables etc. which had been evidently heard from the master but were not recorded in Kumārajīva's own commentary.

The third component includes passages containing explanations which are significantly different from or alternative to Kumārajīva's ones. This category includes also many *original explanations* in which Sengzhao draws freely from the Chinese philosophical tradition (particularly from *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* and the *Yijing*) and adapts those materials to the Buddhist milieu and to the specific needs of his exegesis.

**Daosheng's commentary** - In his exegesis Daosheng neither shows a special interest for the Indian cultural background nor seems to be concerned about framing his views into a particular literary form like Sengzhao did. The most striking feature of his commentary is perhaps the adoption of the Xuanxue language theory claiming that the words of a text could not exhaustively convey the message the Sages of old had in mind and were just traces left by them which could provide an aid for grasping their original intention. Daosheng develops this assumption into an effective heuristic method allowing him to find out the truth beyond the word level or, otherwise stated, to grasp the Buddha's message not by looking *at* the text, but rather by looking *through* it.

Daosheng's annotations do not accompany the full text sentence by sentence, but tend instead to focus on specific passages of interest; here a topic is explained and contextualized into the broader background of the author's world-view. The interest of his commentary lies in the fact that it contains *in nuce* some important conceptions (e.g. the Buddha-nature theory, the characterization of Buddha as the Principle -*li* 理-, or cosmic truth pervading the universe) which Daosheng would further develop in later works such as the *Lotus sūtra Commentary* and the *Nirvāṇa sūtra Commentary*. These philosophical ideas will in turn become key notions in the Chinese Buddhism of the subsequent ages.

**The third chapter** focuses on the editing and transmission of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary*. Here I collect and discuss the most relevant available evidence regarding the textual history of the commentary from its composition up to its first printing. By relying on internal evidence and on a vast range of external sources I reconstruct some important passages leading to the formation of this text that had previously not been considered. Along such discussion the reader will be able to glimpse some of the Chinese cultural modes of dealing with

scriptures, e.g. how the Chinese *literati* constructed them, how they selected and combined together different materials, how and why they chose to pass them down etc.

The textual history of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* is engaging since its very beginning given that - as it seems - two different Chinese versions of the sūtra were produced one after another by Kumārajīva: the first (of which only few fragments survive) was titled *Pimoluojie jing* 毘摩羅詰經 and was probably written down by Sengrui 僧叡; the second was called *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經 (the version that has been passed down to us), it represented an improvement of the former and was probably written down by Sengzhao. Some evidence makes us believe that Kumārajīva's comment to the first version was in some cases substantially modified in the second.

After their composition, exegetical materials related to this scripture must have circulated in the form of independent commentaries for some time before four of them were assembled into a collective commentary. As we know from the sources, Sui exegetes like Zhiyi 智顗 (538-597) and Jizang 吉藏 (549-623) consulted this early compilation which was edited during the Southern dynasties, much probably under the Southern Liang 南梁 (502-557).

During the Sui a new kind of exegesis was started by state-sponsored exegetes like the above mentioned Zhiyi and Jizang. Their approach was eminently interpretative and aimed at developing on the basis of a certain sūtra a set of original theories which would lay the foundations of distinctively Chinese Buddhist sects. On imperial request, Zhiyi had composed a series of new commentaries on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* which were later adopted as the official interpretation of the text; as a consequence, the old Guanzhong exegesis became obsolete and fell into oblivion.

Only during the mid-Tang period the Guanzhong exegesis of this text started to enjoy new attention. By that time the interpretative commentaries had become so intricate and chaotic that could hardly serve as an aid for the neophytes to approach the scriptures; this is why Daoye 道液, a Tiantai monk involved in the translation and proselytizing activities at the capital Chang'an, decided to look back to the old Guanzhong exegesis, which was much more clear and accessible: his *Jingming jing Guanzhong shu* 淨名經關中疏 - a commented edition of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* mainly based on the Guanzhong exegesis - became a popular primer for the devotees who wanted to study the sūtra. And it is likely that Daoye's work served as a model for the editors of the commentary *Zhu Weimojie jing* [T1775] in 10 fascicles.

It was under the Northern Song that the commentary in 10 fascicles underwent what was probably the last complete revision and collation before being printed and included in the Buddhist Canon. Revision was undertaken by a group of high-ranking Confucian scholars officially appointed as scribes at the "Institute for the Translation of the Sūtras" (*Yi jing yuan* 譯經院), an institution established at the capital Bianjing 汴京 (the present-day Kaifeng) in the year 980 at the orders of Emperor Taizu 太祖 (r. 960-976) who wanted to revive the activity of translation of the Buddhist scriptures.

## WETENSCHAPPELIJKE SAMENVATTING

Dit proefschrift onderneemt een diepteanalyse van het *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-Commentaar* (Zhu Weimojie jing 注維摩詰經 [T1775]), een verzameling van verklarende aantekeningen op de Chinese versie van de *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (406 AD) geschreven door de grote Kuqaanse vertaler Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (344-413) en twee van zijn Chinese “leerlingen”, namelijk Sengzhao 僧肇 (384-414) en Daosheng 道生 (ca. 355-434).

De tekst is geanalyseerd en bediscussieerd vanuit verscheidene perspectieven, elk behandeld in één hoofdstuk en gefocust op een specifiek concept. Deze concepten zijn: 1. **vertaling**; 2. **interpretatie**; 3. **redactie en overdracht**.

**Het eerste hoofdstuk** focust op vertaling. Het materiaal in het *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-Commentaar* is voor een gedeelte een “bijproduct” van het vertaalproces zoals het georganiseerd was aan het begin van de 5<sup>e</sup> eeuw, en daarom begin ik met het schetsen van de Boeddhistische vertalingsactiviteiten in de stad Chang’an, waarbij ik de ontwikkeling van haar benadering en technieken onderzoek. Ik beklemtoon hierbij de invloed van Dao’ans 道安 (312-385) organisatie van het vertalingswerk onder de Vroege Qin 前秦 (350-394) op Kumārajīva’s vertalingswerk. Niet alleen profiteert de Kuqaanse meester van de waardevolle hulp van een zeer ervaren groep van Chinese mederwerkers die opgeleid zijn onder Dao’an, maar hij profiteerde ook van de diepgaande kritische reflecties van de oude Chinese monnik met betrekking tot vele praktische kwesties van het vertalen, die gedeeltelijk haar weerslag vonden in een set van richtlijnen die bekend staan als “de vijf gevallen van het verliezen van de bron en drie moeilijkheden” (*wu shiben, san buyi* 五失本, 三不易).

**Het tweede hoofdstuk** focust op interpretatie. Het behandelt de drie belangrijkste commentaren die onderdeel zijn van de *Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經 [T1775], waarbij ook de culturele achtergrond en de levensloop van elke auteur wordt besproken. Samen met de inhoud van de commentaren legt mijn analyse een speciale nadruk op de culturele wijzen van tekstreceptie, wat inhoudt dat de “formele kenmerken” van deze werken besproken moeten worden.

**Kumārajīva’s commentaar** – Mijn analyse toont aan dat het doel van Kumārajīva’s exegese is om de culturele kloof te dichten en het Chinese publiek bekend te laten worden met de bredere Indiase context waarin Boeddhisme als een religie en een levenswijze is opgekomen en zich heeft ontwikkeld. In meer technische termen is Kumārajīva’s exegese op een aantal “bouwstenen” gebouwd, die ik in deze sectie analyseer.

Op een basaal niveau wordt de tekst van de sūtra toegelicht door **het verklaren van Sanskrietwoorden** – vaak verrijkt met etymologieën en voorbeelden – en soms door **verwijzingen naar de Sanskriet-tekst** (meestal aangegeven door de uitdrukking “de Sanskriet-versie zegt” *fanben yun* 梵本云), welks de betekenis van bepaalde woorden beter specificeert en de beoordelingen ondersteunt (waarvan enkelen duidelijk denigrerend zijn) van de overeenkomende Chinese termen die gekozen zijn door de Chinese exegeten of schriftgeleerden in de vertaling.

Kumārajīva verrijkt zijn exegese door *ad hoc* “uitbreidingen”, die een verscheidenheid aan extra materiaal toevoegen. Eén van deze uitbreidingen, die **“opheldering der categorieën”** genoemd kan worden, bestaat uit discussies omtrent de gehele categorie van zaken waar een specifieke term, aanwezig in de tekst van de sūtra, traditioneel toe behoorde (bijvoorbeeld de verklaring van de term “materiële voeding” 揣食 leidt tot het bediscussiëren van alle “vier soorten voeding” 四食). Andere uitbreidingen geven achtergrondinformatie over **de Indiase samenleving, verhalen en tradities**, of **achtergrondinformatie over de personages** die in de tekst worden genoemd (zowel Boeddhistische alsook niet-Boeddhistische). **Anekdoten** worden ook vaak verteld, die de abstracte concepten die aanwezig zijn in de sūtra voorzien van een

gedramatiseerde uitleg; in andere gevallen worden belangrijke filosofische begrippen uitgelegd in toepasselijke *filosofische en doctrinale discussies*.

Als een geheel beslaat Kumārajīva's exegese een boeiende mix van orale uiteenzetting naar Indiaas sjabloon, Centraalaziatische vertelkunst en Chinese filologische toepassingen. Het duidelijkste bewijs voor haar orale oorsprong kan gevonden worden in enkele *vraag-en-antwoorddebatten* tussen Kumārajīva en het publiek die door de schriftgeleerden zijn opgetekend en in de tekst bewaard zijn gebleven.

**Sengzhao's commentaar** – Terwijl Kumārajīva's commentaar voornamelijk voortkomt uit de orale exegese die hij tegelijkertijd met de vertaling van de sūtra opstelde, is het materiaal in Sengzhao's commentaar gevarieerder. Het beslaat ten minste drie onderdelen. Het eerste onderdeel omvat *speculatieve passages* waarin filosofische ideeën opvattingen worden uitgedrukt via voorzichtig gecomponeerde argumentatieve structuren, voornamelijk opgesteld in de parallelle prosa-stijl (*pianwen* 駢文). Dit materiaal, dat gebaseerd is op een omvangrijke en zeer gestructureerde opvatting van de sūtra als een samenhangend geheel, vormt een continuüm met de Xuanxue-exegese, en vormt wellicht het meest originele deel van Sengzhao's commentaar; door het enten van de Indiase Mādhyamika-filosofie op de patronen die bekend zijn voor iemand in de Chinese culturele sfeer is de Chinese monnik zelfs in staat om de oorspronkelijke formulering te “verraden”, terwijl de esoterische betekenis bewaard blijft en over culturele grenzen wordt overgedragen.

Het tweede onderdeel van Sengzhao's commentaar bestaat uit *passages die een duidelijke verbinding met Kumārajīva's commentaar laten zien*; ze bevatten Sengzhao's parafrasen van de verklaringen van de Kuqaanse meester alsmede vermeldingen met betrekking tot informatie over de Sanskriettermen, Indiase tradities, gelijkenissen etc. die klaarblijkelijk van de meester afstammen maar niet in Kumārajīva's eigen commentaar zijn opgenomen.

Het derde onderdeel omvat passages die verklaringen bevatten die significant verschillen van of een alternatief zijn voor die van Kumārajīva. Deze categorie omvat ook vele *originele verklaringen* waarin Sengzhao vrijelijk uit de Chinese filosofische traditie put (voornamelijk van *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi* en de *Yijing*) en dit materiaal aan de Boeddhistische omgeving en de specifieke behoeften van zijn exegese aanpast.

**Daosheng's commentaar** – Daosheng toont in zijn exegese geen bijzondere interesse voor de Indiase culturele achtergrond, noch probeert hij zijn standpunten in een specifieke literaire vorm te vangen, zoals Sengzhao dat deed. Het meest opvallende kenmerk van dit commentaar is wellicht het overnemen van de taaltheorie van de Xuanzue-filosofie, die stelt dat de woorden van een tekst niet in staat zijn om de boodschap van de Wijzen van vroeger uitputtend weer te geven, en alleen sporen zijn die door hen zijn achtergelaten die als hulpmiddel gebruikt kunnen worden bij het begrijpen van hun oorspronkelijke bedoeling. Daosheng ontwikkelt deze aanname in een effectieve heuristische methode die hem in staat stelt de waarheid te vinden voorbij het woordniveau of, anders geformuleerd, die hem de boodschap van de Boeddha niet laat begrijpen door het lezen van de tekst, maar juist door “voorbij” de tekst te kijken.

Daosheng's aantekeningen volgen de tekst niet zin voor zin, maar richten zich op specifieke passages waar belang aan wordt gehecht; op die plekken wordt een onderwerp uitgelegd en gecontextualiseerd met betrekking tot de bredere achtergrond van het wereldbeeld van de auteur. Dit commentaar is interessant omdat het enkele belangrijke begrippen in het kort bevat (bijvoorbeeld de theorie van de Boeddhanatuur, het karakteriseren van de Buddha als het *-li*-principe 理-, oftewel kosmische waarheid die het hele universum omvat) die Daosheng in latere werken zoals het *Commentaar op de Lotus-sūtra* en het *Commentaar op de Nirvāṇa-sūtra* verder ontwikkelt. Deze filosofische ideeën zullen op hun beurt kernbegrippen worden in de volgende tijdperken van het Chinese Boeddhisme.

**Het derde hoofdstuk** focust op de redactie en overdracht van het *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-Commentaar*. Hier verzamel en bediscussieer ik de meest relevante beschikbare bewijsstukken over de tekstuele geschiedenis van het commentaar, van het componeren ervan tot de eerste druk. Gebaseerd op intern bewijs en een grote verscheidenheid aan externe bronnen reconstrueer ik enkele belangrijke fasen die leiden tot de formatie van deze tekst die voorheen nog niet bij de discussie werden betrokken. Samen met zulke discussies krijgt de lezer iets te zien van de Chinese culturele normen wat betreft het omgaan met geschriften, bijvoorbeeld hoe de Chinese geleerden hen samenstelden, hoe zij verschillende materialen selecteerden en combineerden, en waarom zij ervoor kozen om deze door te geven etc.

De tekstuele geschiedenis van het *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-Commentaar* is innemend vanaf haar begin, sinds – naar het lijkt – twee verschillende Chinese versies van de sūtra achter elkaar zijn geproduceerd door Kumārajīva: de eerste (waarvan alleen een paar fragmenten zijn overgeleverd) had de titel *Pimoluojie jing* 毘摩羅詰經 en was waarschijnlijk opgetekend door Sengrui 僧叡; de tweede heette *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經 (de versie die wij vandaag de dag hebben), welks een verbetering was ten opzichte van de voorgaande en waarschijnlijk door Sengzhao was opgetekend. Sommige bewijsstukken doen ons geloven dat Kumārajīva's commentaar op de eerste versie op sommige plaatsen substantieel was aangepast in de tweede versie.

Nadat ze gecomponeerd waren heeft exegetisch materiaal dat aan deze sūtra is gerelateerd voor enige tijd gecirculeerd als zelfstandige commentaren voordat vier hiervan werden samengevoegd in een collectief commentaar. Zoals we weten uit de bronnen raadpleegde Sui-exegeten zoals Zhiyi 智顗 (538-597) en Jizang 吉藏 (549-623) deze vroege compilatie die was geredacteerd gedurende de Zuidelijke dynastie ʼn, het meest waarschijnlijk onder de Zuidelijke Liang (502-557).

Gedurende de Sui-dynastie was een nieuw soort exegese begonnen door exegeten die door de staat werden gesponsord zoals de eerdergenoemde Zhiyi en Jizang. Hun benadering was bij uitstek interpretatief en had als doel het ontwikkelen van een groep originele theorie ʼn op basis van een bepaalde sūtra die de basis legden van karakteristiek Chinese Boeddhistische groeperingen. Op verzoek van het keizerrijk had Zhiyi een serie van nieuwe commentaren gecomponeerd op de *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* die later werden opgenomen als de officiële interpretatie van de tekst; als gevolg werd de oude Guanzhong-exegese overbodig en verviel in vergetelheid.

Alleen gedurende de midden-Tang periode kwam de Guanzhong-exegese opnieuw onder de aandacht. Tegen deze tijd waren interpretatieve commentaren zo ingewikkeld en chaotisch geworden dat zij onmogelijk als hulpmiddel voor beginners dienst konden doen om de geschriften te benaderen; daarom besloot Daoye 道液, een Tiantai monnik die betrokken was in het vertaal- en missioneringswerk in de hoofdstad Chang'an, om opnieuw naar de oude Guanzhong-exegese te kijken, die veel duidelijker en toegankelijker was: zijn *Jingming jing Guanzhong shu* 淨名經關中疏 – een becommentarieerde editie van de *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* voornamelijk gebaseerd op de Guanzhong-exegese – werd een populaire inleiding voor de toegewijden die de sūtra wilden bestuderen. Het is ook waarschijnlijk dat Daoye's werk als model gold voor de redacteurs van het commentaar *Zhu Weimojie jing* [T1775] in 10 fasciculi.

Het was gedurende de noordelijke Song dat het commentaar in 10 fasciculi haar waarschijnlijk laatste volledige herziening en sortering onderging voordat hij werd gedrukt en toegevoegd in de Boeddhistische Canon. De herziening werd ondernomen door een groep hooggeplaatste Confuciaanse geleerden die officieel als schriftgeleerden aan het “Instituut voor de Vertaling van de Sūtras” (*Yi jing yuan* 譯經院) waren benoemd, een instituut dat was gevestigd in de hoofdstad Bianjing 汴京 (het huidige Kaifeng) in het jaar 980 op bevel van keizer Taizu 太祖 (r. 960-976) die het vertalingswerk van de Boeddhistische geschriften opnieuw wilde oppakken.

## SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF THE PH. D. STUDENT

I was born in Italy in 1979. After high school degree in 1998 I enrolled at the Department of Oriental Languages and Cultures of the Ca'Foscari University of Venice. For four years I studied modern and classical Chinese along with Chinese and Indian philosophy eventually graduating in 2004 with a thesis on the earliest Chinese interpretations of Buddhist emptiness as it was formulated in the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras (the so called “Six Schools or Seven Sects”, *Liu jia qi zong* 六家七宗).

Right after graduation I obtained a Chinese Government scholarship and spent two years in mainland China (Shandong University and Nanjing University) studying Chinese philology, philosophy and Buddhist history. At the same time I had the chance to work as Chinese interpreter and translator at various local translation and travel agencies.

In 2007 I won a scholarship offered by the Taiwanese Ministry of Education that allowed me to do a master in Chinese philosophy at the Philosophy Department of the Furen University of Taipei. I graduated in 2009 with a thesis on the four “primitivist” chapters of the *Zhuangzi* supervised by Prof. Ding Yuanzhi 丁原植. While in Taiwan I had the chance to continue working as translator and also as language teacher at some local private schools.

Having returned to Italy, I worked for a semester as teacher and Chinese translator at a private language school. Then I soon moved to mainland China again and continued working full time as language teacher at the Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages in Shaoxing (Zhejiang Province) (courses taught: oral Italian, Chinese-Italian translation etc.).

In 2014, while still in China, I applied for entering Ph. D. program at the Groningen University. Application was accepted and this allowed me to come back to Europe and resume my sinological studies and investigate more deeply some aspects of Medieval Chinese Buddhist exegesis through the study of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Commentary* 注維摩詰經 by Sengzhao 僧肇 and other exegetes, which constitutes the focus of the present work.